10¢ DIME
ALL STORIES COMPLETE
FEBRUARY 1ST

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

TWICE A MONTH

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

MURDER AISLE
By OSCAR SCHISGALL

SKELETON WITHOUT ARMS
By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

AND OTHERS

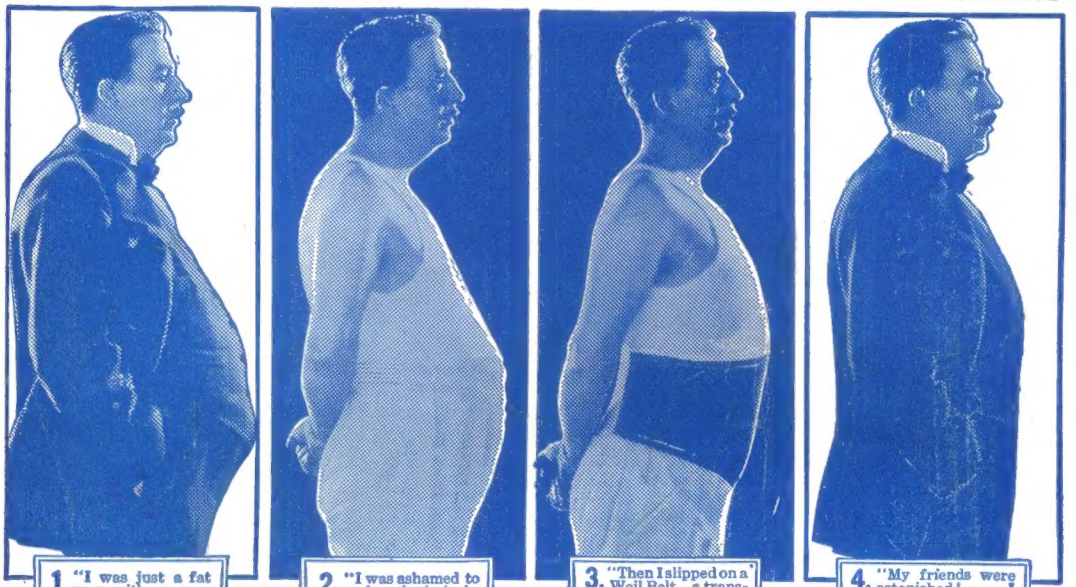


FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... in 10 MINUTES!

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES" WRITES GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach . . . ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"

3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

4. "My friends were astonished! . . . I looked better — my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

We are so sure that you will reduce your waistline at least *three* inches that we want you to . . .

TRY THE WEIL BELT FOR 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS . . .

. . . . or it won't cost you one cent . . . . even the postage will be refunded!

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—or it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its constant gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit . . . its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place—that they are no longer fatigued—and that it gently increases their endurance and vigor!

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny! Even the postage you pay to return the package will be refunded!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
92 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

Use coupon or write your name and address on a penny post card.



THIS BOOK Shows YOU how to build a Mighty Arm!

25¢



FREE



Send for "MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM" A Complete Course for Only 25c

WHY NOT GET AN ARM OF MIGHT with the power and grip to obey your physical desires. In a very short time you should be able to build your arm from a scrawny piece of skin and bone to one with a powerful bicep that will be respected by men and admired by women!

I don't mean just a 16-inch bicep but a 15-inch forearm and a powerful 8-inch wrist!

THIS SPECIALLY PREPARED COURSE WILL BUILD EVERY MUSCLE IN YOUR ARM

I know it will... for it has been scientifically worked out for that purpose. Many of my pupils have developed a pair of triceps shaped like a horseshoe, and just as strong, and a pair of biceps that show their double head formation. The sinewy cables between the biceps and elbow are deep and thick with wire cable-like ligaments. The forearm bellies with bulk, the great supinator lifting muscles become a column of power, and their wrists are alive and writhe with cordy sinew. Send 25c for this course today...Start now to build a he-man's arm as beautiful, brawny and magnificent as the village blacksmith's.

You can't make a mistake. The assurance of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. I give you all the secrets of strength illustrated and explained as you like them. Mail your order now while you can still get this course for only 25c.

I will not limit you to the arm. Try any one of my courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only $1.00.

MAIL YOUR ORDER NOW

and you will receive a Free Copy of

"NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON"

It describes Geo. F. Jowett's rise from a puny boy to be one of the world's strongest athletes with a chest measurement of 49 inches and an 18-inch bicep! It explains why he is called "Champion of Champions"... and there is a "thrill" in every page.

A priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how to build symmetry and strength the equal of their own. Reach out, Grasp This Special Offer.

DON'T DELAY... MAIL TODAY!

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George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send, by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below for which I am enclosing $_____

- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Arm, 25c
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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EVERY STORY COMPLETE — EVERY STORY NEW

Vol. 10 **CONTENTS for FEBRUARY 1st, 1934** **No. 2**

COMPLETE NOVEL-LENGTH DETECTIVE MYSTERY

Watch a man become a

Skeleton Without Arms.....Frederick C. Davis **10**
As the murder monster of Station KSPS explodes his human fire-crackers.

SMASHING HORATIO HUMBERTON NOVELETTE

Put on

Shoes For the Dead.....J. Paul Suter **47**
And stalk through Devil's Wood after a coffined corpse that roams by night.

GRIPPING MIDNIGHT MURDER TALE

Shake hands with

The Faceless Horror.....J. J. Des Ormeaux **73**
In that empty house where crimeland cashes in its paychecks for danger dollars.

BREATH-TAKING MYSTERY-ACTION THRILLER

Race down

Murder Aisle.....Oscar Schisgall **100**
With Detective Canley as he tracks the killer of the beautiful girl in Upper 13.

Variety Is the

Spice of Life.....Editor **124**
And of death, too, if some of DIME DETECTIVE'S murder fans are right. How about it?

Cover—*"From Her Throat the Hilt of a Knife"*.....John Howitt
From "Murder Aisle."

Issued the First and Fifteenth of Every Month

Watch for the February 15th Issue — On the Newsstands February 1st

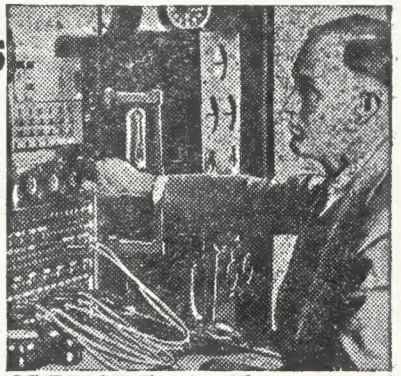
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I'll Send My First Lesson *FREE*



Here's Proof

It Shows How Easy it is to Learn at Home *to fill a* GOOD JOB in Radio



Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm so sure that I can train you at home in your spare time for a good job in Radio that I'll send you my first lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Then you will know why many men with less than a grammar school education and no technical experience have become Radio Experts and are earning two to three times their former pay as a result of my training.

Many Radio Experts Make $40, $60, $75 a Week

In less than 15 years, the Radio Industry has grown from a few million to hundreds of millions of dollars. Over 300,000 jobs have been created by this growth, and thousands more will be created by its continued development. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you in the N. R. I. course—have stepped into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations use engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Manufacturers continually employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, service men buyers, for jobs paying up to $7,500 a year. Radio operators on ships enjoy life, see the world, with board and lodging free, and get good pay besides. Dealers and jobbers employ service men, salesmen, buyers, managers, and pay up to $100 a week. My book tells you about these and many other interesting Radio jobs.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time Almost at Once

The day you enroll with me, I send you instructions which you should master quickly for doing 28 Radio jobs common in most every neighborhood, for spare-time money. Throughout your training, I send you information for servicing popular makes of sets! I give you the plans and ideas that have made $200 to $1,000 a year for N. R. I. men in their spare time. My Course is famous as the Course that pays for itself!

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I am so sure that N. R. I. can train you satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service upon completion.

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Mail the coupon now. In addition to the sample lesson, I send my book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It tells you about the opportunities in Radio; tells you about my Course, what others who have taken it are doing and making. This offer is free to any ambitious fellow over 15 years old. Find out what Radio offers you without the slightest obligation. ACT NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 4BK7, Washington, D. C.



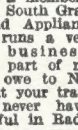
Service Manager Earns $200 a Month

"As Radio Service Manager for Sterchi's four Nashville Stores, my earnings are around $200 a month. My N. R. I. training enables me to keep our customers satisfied."
E. H. LEFTWICH,
Sterchi Bros. Stores, Inc.
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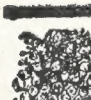
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The Wonder of the World

Japanese Rose Bushes bloom all the year round. Just think of it. Six weeks after planting the seed, the plants will be in full bloom. It may not seem possible, but we positively guarantee it to be so. They will bloom every ten weeks, Summer or Winter, and when three years old the bush will be a mass of roses, bearing from a hundred up to a thousand roses on each bush. The flowers are in three shades —white, pink, and crimson. The plants will do well both in and out doors. We guarantee at least three bushes to grow from each packet of seed. Price, 10c packet, 3 pkts. for 25c postpaid

10 Cts.

Chinese Fragrant Tree Fern



Just introduced; noted for its rapid growth. An exquisite, beautiful ornamental plant. Foliage is rich dark green. Forms a grand pyramidal bushy shape 3 feet high. Reaches very desirable for decorative purposes, wreaths, etc. Keeps 150 yrs. 3 for 40c.

Weather Plant



NATURE'S WEATHER PROPHET By mysterious changes that take place, this remarkable plant accurately forecasts the weather many hours in advance. Will grow anywhere all the year around. An interesting house plant. Berry bears fragrant, pink, butterfly shape flowers. Seeds, 15c packet, 3 for 40c, postpaid

GROUND ALMONDS

Amazingly Prolific—Easily Grown From Seed

The Ground Almond has a flavor that is MOST EXCELLENT, resembling the cocoanut. The meat is snow white, covered with a shell or skin of brown color. It grows close to the surface and anything from 200 to 1000 almonds may be expected from a single nut. There is no trouble whatever in growing anywhere and in any kind of soil. May be planted any time, under plants or in the open ground. In the fall you will have an ENORMOUS CROP of the MOST DELICIOUS ALMONDS YOU EVER TASTED. Seeds 15c PKT.



Chinese Cabbage



Novelty from China and should be grown in every garden. Seems to be a cross between Celery and Cos Lettuce. Flavor is more mild than any other cabbage. Can be served on the table and eaten raw or cooked like cabbage, spinach or lettuce or made into salad. Grows very rapidly, easy to cultivate. You can create quite a sensation by cultivating this remarkable novelty. Pkts, 15c packet, 3 pkts. for 40c.

TREE OF HEAVEN



This splendid ornamental tree is a native of China and is called the Tree of Heaven on account of its great height. It is very hardy, thrives in any soil, no matter how poor, and grows from 50 to 70 feet high from seed the first summer. The leaves are from 3 to 6 feet in length and resemble those of the fern. The tree is a grand specimen. Nothing outside of the tropics can excel it in this respect. Large package of bloom, following season by great clusters of curious seed pods, make a conversational thing of beauty. Packet, 15c; 3 packets 40c

THE REMARKABLE FIREFLY PLANT

Fills the Atmosphere with Fragrant Aroma

A Vine that Blooms at Night



One of the most rapid growing vines known. Under favorable conditions it has been known to grow OVER 25 FEET IN A SINGLE WEEK. In a very short space of time it will have climbed to a great height and be covered with IMMENSE FLOWERS, from 3 to 7 inches in diameter. It is indeed a most beautiful thing, unlike other plants, the flowers OPEN AT THE EVENING, and remain open until about noon the following day. In dull weather they will remain open all day. It is a most INTERESTING sight to watch the opening and closing of the flowers as the clouds appear and disappear. As the flowers open they give forth the most DELIGHTFUL AROMA and perfume the air for many rods around in full of scented fragrance. It is to this the object of fragrance is performed, and such curious provision to enable scenting at night time as to the cause of the charming aroma, frequently alluding to an orchard in the distance. Their odor. PRICE 15 CENTS packet, two packets for 25 CENTS, POSTPAID.

The Great Wonderberry



A spacious berry that may be grown and ripened from seed in any soil or climate in 3 months. The flavor is fine and surpasses all other varieties either raw, cooked, canned or preserved in any form. The fruit is blue-black in color, and tastes like a luscious, rich blueberry. One bush will produce an enormous amount of fruit, yielding a great measure of rich fruit all Summer and Fall. Packet, 10c, 3 pkts. for 25c, postpaid.

Shoo Fly Plant



A very remarkable Botanical curiosity you should have. Though pretty to look at is said flies will not remain in a room where it is grown. Bears very pretty blossoms; blooms summer and winter. Grows rapidly, and should be in every home. SEEDS 15c pkt; 3 for 40c, postpaid.

Banana Musk Melon



Quite a curiosity and resembles a banana. Peculiar sheep and its delicious flavor makes it worth your while cultivating. Flesh is deep red of excellent flavor. Very high bred variety, and should be grown in every garden. As high as a dollar sometimes being demanded for one single melon. Seeds 10c, 3 pkts. for 25c.

The Great Umbrella Palm

Easily Grown From Seed Winter or Summer



The Japanese Umbrella Palm is a semi-aquatic plant. It is easily grown from seed either in a bowl of water or in very damp soil. Probably the most usual, as well as the most interesting method, is to cultivate the plant in a bowl or jardiniere filled with water to within three inches of good garden soil at the bottom. The seeds soon commence to germinate, and the plant shoots up stems two to three feet high and rapidly assumes a most pretty palm-like appearance, as shown in the engraving. The tops of the stems are surmounted by a whorl of small Umbrella-shaped leaves, of a many appearance. We will send a package of the seed, with full instructions for culture, for only 15c or three packets for 40c postpaid.

Perfume Plant



Blooms only at night, filling forth with most delicious, perfumed fragrance for quite a distance. Caused much comment. For home or garden. Also valuable because of rare perfume made from it. SEEDS 15c pkt. 3 for 25c.

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Very curious, odd looking, strange species. Easy to grow. Will thrive anywhere with little or no moisture. Flowers are of exquisite beauty and delightfully scented. To do so will be astonished at the results of the seeds. Cacti just sprouting. Packet, 10 cents. Three packets for 25 cents, postpaid.

GIGANTIC GUINEA BUTTER BEANS

The NEW EDIBLE VEGETABLE WONDER

Grows to an astounding size, the pods ranging from 3 to 6 feet long, and weighing anything from 10 to 16 lbs. each and even more. One pod is sufficient for a family for several meals. Very palatable and rich in nutritious materials. The delicate buttery flavor is much appreciated. The vines are easily grown, very prolific, and a most welcome and valuable adjunct to your garden. Everybody should find them the most delicious vegetable you have ever tasted. Imported direct. Unobtainable elsewhere. We have a large package of seeds for sale. Directions for cultivating and cooking. 25c, postpaid.

Kudzu Vine



Most rapid growing vine known. Will grow 20 feet in one week. Luxuriant foliage, lovely purple flowers, very fragrant. Nothing to equal it for shade purposes and quick growth. Seeds 15c packet, 3 for 40c.

Yard Long Bean

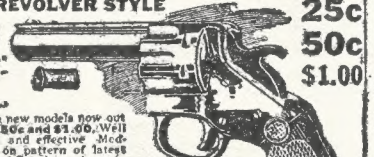


Produces enormous crop of long, slender, round pods, of excellent quality for snap beans. Pods grow from 2 to 3 feet in length. Very tender and fine flavor. The vines are rampant growers, an interesting curiosity. Seeds 15c pkt., 3 for 40c.

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Blank Cartridge Pistol

REVOLVER STYLE



.22 CAL. MADE IN U.S.A.

25c 50c $1.00

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Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

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With this new VAMPING BOARD. No teacher needed. Surprisingly simple. Place the Vamping Board upright over the piano keys, and vamp away to thousands of songs, ballads, waltzes, fox trots, rag time, etc. No knowledge of music required. After using it a few times the Board may be dispensed with entirely. Price 15c postpaid.

Novelty French Photo Ring



Here is a very great novelty in Rings, that is selling by the thousands. It is a nicely made ring, finished in imitation platinum, and set with a large imitation diamond. It looks just like an ordinary ring, but in the shank of the ring is a small microscope picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet is magnified to almost incredible degree and with astonishing clearness. There is quite an assortment of pictures that should suit all tastes. Some are pictures of bathing girl beauties, pretty French Actresses, etc., others are views of places of interest in France, Panama Canal and elsewhere, others show the Lord's Prayer in type, every word of which can be read by persons with normal eyesight. They are interesting without being in any way objectionable. PRICE, Set, 3 for 25c, or $2.25 per doz. postpaid. 710 page Catalog 10c.

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This book tells how E-plains all about hypnotism. How to hypnotize, how to produce sleep, how to awaken a subject, medical hypnotism, hypnotism of animals, illustrations etc. 125 chapters ONLY 10c ppd.

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Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs, night watchmen and others as a means of self-protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand, the fingers being grasped in the four holes. Very useful in an emergency. Made of aluminum they are very light, weighing less than 2 ounces. Handy pocket size always ready for instant use. PRICE 25c each, 2 for 45c postpaid.

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180 Jokes and Riddles, 64 Magic Tricks, 54 Parlor Games, 73 Toasts, 15 Tricks with Cards, 50 Money-making Secrets, 10 Funny Readings, 3 Monologues, 21 Puzzles and Problems, 5 Comic Recitations, Cute 10 for Checkers and Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Spanish Prison Puzzle, Game of Anagrams, etc. All for 15c postpaid.

WONDERFUL X-RAY TUBE



A wonderful little instrument producing optical illusions both surprising and startling. With it you can see what is apparently the bones of your fingers, the lead in a lead pencil, the interior opening in a pipe stem and many other similar illusions. Price 10c, 3 for 25c.

ITCHING Powder



This is another good practical joke that will continue to entertain your victims to everyone but themselves. It is surprising the amount of fun that is necessary to start the ball rolling when this powder is put in the gift, a few powder on a person's hand and the powder can be relied upon to do the rest. The result is a slightest scratch, then some more scratch, and still more scratch. Price 15c per box, 2 for 25c or 75c per dozen. Shipped by Express.

ANARCHIST BOMBS



One of these glass vials dropped in a room full of people will cause more consternation than a Zeppelin raid. The powerful contents disappears in a short time. 10c per box, 3 boxes for 25c, 75c per doz., by express, $7.50 per gross. Books of Instructions included by Express. Not Prepaid.

SNEEZING POWDER



There is very small amount of this powder on the back of your hand and blow it into the air and watch your unsuspecting victims. Without knowing the reason why it is most likely to cause considerable merriment, as they never suspect the real source, but think they have caught it from the person next. Between the laughing and weeping fits they will be having the time of your life. For parties, political meetings, church or any place at all where there is a gathering of people it is a most valuable aid. Price 10c, 3 for 25c, 75c per dozen. Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

COMICAL MOTTO RINGS



Lots of harmless fun and amusement wearing these rings. Made in platinoid finish (to resemble platinum), with wording as illustrated. Sent postpaid. Price 25c ea. Postpaid.

GoodLuck RING



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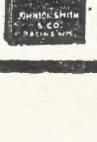
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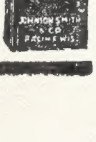
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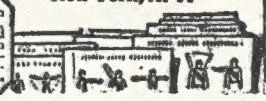
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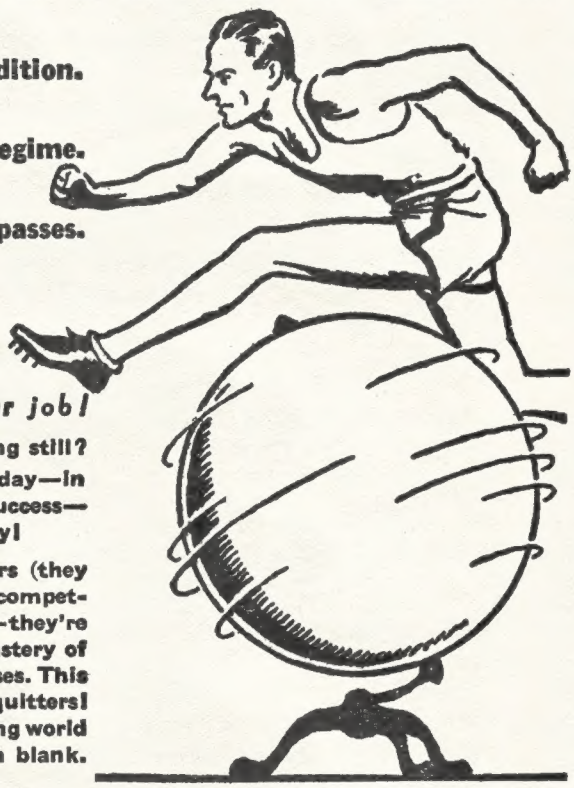
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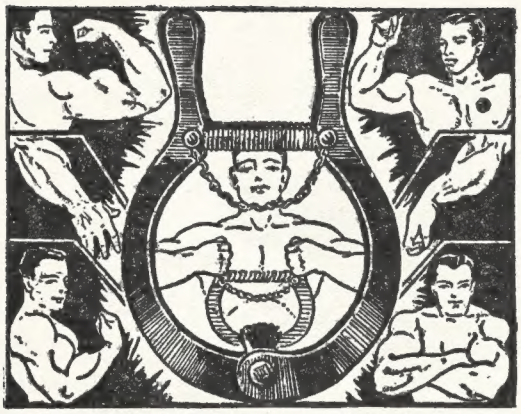
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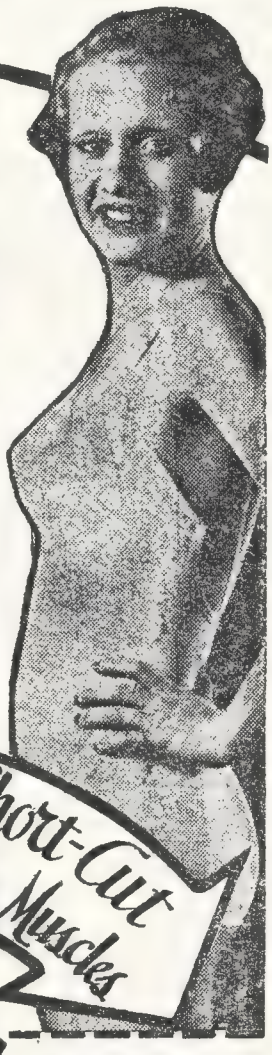
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Smoke and flame gushed from his mouth and nose.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder at the Mike

IN THE shadow of the twin black towers of Radio Station KSPS, which reared above the building that fronted the Stupendous Productions Studios on Santa Monica Boulevard, a

Arms

By Frederick C. Davis

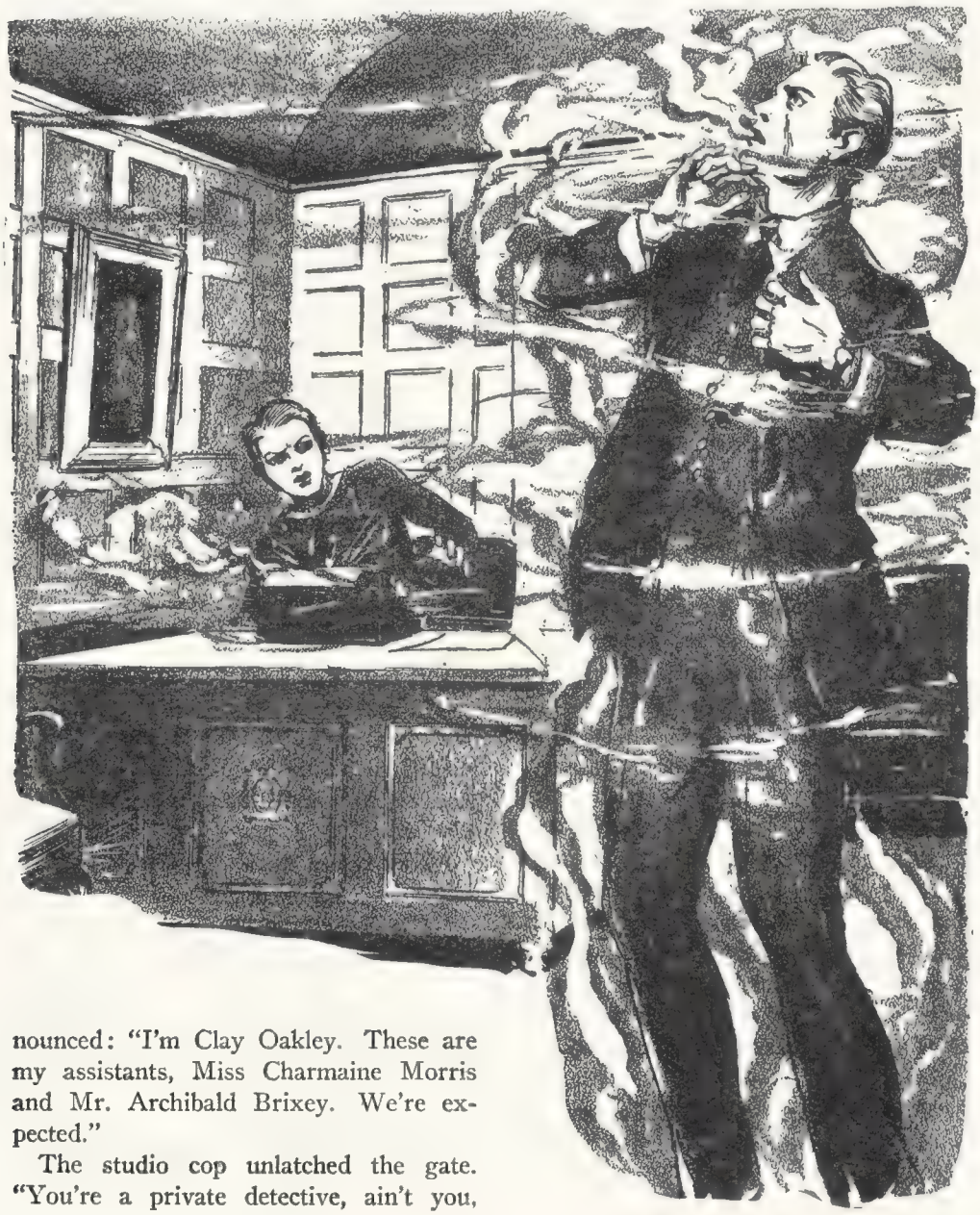
Author of "Blood on the Block," etc.

roadster braked to a stop. Evening traffic whizzed past as two men and a woman left the car and strode toward the ornate gate.

To the studio cop who peered through the bars, the taller of the two men announced: "I'm Clay Oakley. These are my assistants, Miss Charmaine Morris and Mr. Archibald Brixey. We're expected."

The studio cop unlatched the gate. "You're a private detective, ain't you, Mr. Oakley? I bet you've come here to try to find out where Rex Bartell disappeared to."

"That," said Oakley, passing through, "is not a bad guess. Mr. Sartman, I take it, is inside?"



"Yes, sir. Go right on in."

Clay Oakley followed the gravel path toward the neon-decorated doorway of the studio broadcasting station, his arm linked with that of Cherry Morris. With the pert, slender red-head on one side of him, and the aristocratic Mr. Brixey on the other, Oakley was truly flanked by elegance.

"Cherry darling," he remarked, "I should never take you with me on trips like this one, especially when you look as beautiful as you do tonight. Some day a movie executive is going to get your signature on a five-year contract, and then what will become of Oke?"

"Oke, my dear," answered Cherry, "I wonder. But it will take more than a five-year contract to lure me away from you."

"I say!" exclaimed the immaculate Archibald Brixey. "Are we investigating a mysterious disappearance or attending a meeting of a mutual admiration society?"

"Both," said Oakley, and he stopped, peering down at the broad mat which lay outside the bronze door.

An envelope was lying there. He picked it up and turned it over. It was plain and cheap and sealed; and across its face was scrawled a name—Max Sartman. Below was printed—Private. Oakley inspected it as he opened the door.

ACROSS the luxurious reception room of the radio studios hurried a squat, paunchy man. He gripped Oakley's hand and wheezed, "I'm glad to see you!" He gave a tug at Brixey's fingers, devoted a moment to admiring Cherry Morris's bright beauty, and said breathlessly: "We must go somewhere to talk privately, Mr. Oakley."

"For you, Mr. Sartman," Oakley said, proffering the envelope. "I found it on the door mat."

He looked about as Sartman ripped the envelope. The lobby of the broadcasting studio was, like the rest of Hollywood, pretentious, garish and modernistic. Most of the talkie-producing companies had annexed radio stations, and the Stupendous Productions organization was no exception. Its antenna shot music and advertising into the ether eighteen hours a day, and the programs were garnished with bits done by the studio stars. Within these walls there was the same feverish tension which characterized the big sound stages while scenes were being shot.

A voice issued from a loud-speaker in the lobby while Sartman peered at the letter. Oakley noted the cultivated enunciation and the superabundance of first-person-singulars which issued from the cabinet.

Sartman turned to him with a start and said with a gasp: "Read that! Read it!"

Oakley read it.

> If you want Rex Bartell back alive get ready to pay a big ransom. Keep the police out of it. Get $100,000 in small bills and have them ready. The next letter will tell you what to do with it. If you don't obey orders your handsome young actor will be sent back to you piece by piece.

The letter was unsigned.

Peering over Oakley's shoulder, Archibald Brixey observed: "A hundred thousand? I jolly well think no actor is worth that much!"

"This is the first—" Oakley began to ask.

"The first we've heard, yes! My God, Mr. Oakley! Do you think they'll do it?" Max Sartman put the questions gaspingly. "Do you think they'll kill him? A hundred thousand dollars! My God! That's ten times more than we pay Bartell in a year!"

"Anything is possible," observed Oakley, "in Hollywood. Let's get to work,

Mr. Sartman. The studio is retaining me. You want to get your young actor back safely. But you've already notified the police and—"

"The police—pah!" spat Sartman. "That big ox, McClane—what can he do? He couldn't find the Pacific Ocean. You must find Rex Bartell, Mr. Oakley, and get him back. We have parts ready for him—small parts, but—" Sartman made a frantic gesture.

"Just what," asked Oakley, "happened to Rex Bartell?"

"Come with me, Mr. Oakley."

Sartman led the way up richly carpeted steps. Cherry Morris stayed at Oakley's side, her svelt evening gown trailing. On the second floor of the building glass doors looked into the broadcasting studios. In one an orchestra was tuning up, preparing to go on the air. In another a young man, painfully handsome, was seated at an antique Spanish table, reading from a script into a microphone.

"Richard Marsh," Sartman said, passing the door. "He's broadcasting now."

Marsh was one of Stupendous Productions' juveniles, of minor prominence. Because it was his business to keep up on all news of the film studios, Oakley remembered that Richard Marsh was under contract personally to Max Sartman, chief supervisor of Stupendous. He had attracted notice first as a radio singer, and the appeal of his voice had brought him a chance in the talkies.

SARTMAN pushed open the door of a studio on the opposite side of the hallway. Oakley and his assistants entered. The room was garishly decorated. It contained a grand piano and folding chairs, and a standard microphone. Otherwise it was empty.

"Here, in this room, Mr. Oakley," Sartman stated. "Rex Bartell was seen for the last time."

Oakley extracted a notebook from his coat. "I've noted down a few facts on the case. Bartell was due to broadcast at nine o'clock night before last. He was to use this studio, you say. He came in here a few minutes before nine, and—"

"He was early," Sartman interrupted. "The control man wasn't in the monitor room yet." He indicated a cubicle in the corner of the studio windowed with a double pane of glass, in which were black-paneled instruments. "The announcer wasn't even ready. So he went to that table and sat down and began to read over his script—and disappeared."

"Really!" said Archibald Brixey.

Oakley walked about the studio, glancing out the windows. "Two stories up," he observed. "A good thirty-foot drop. There's another story above, isn't there?"

"Yes. The master control room is upstairs. It's crazy to think that Bartell jumped out of one of those windows, just before he was ready to go on the air. Anyway, he was kidnaped. But there wasn't any way he could get out—none!"

"Couldn't he have simply walked out the door?"

"No. There's only one door. While Bartell was still in this studio, I came upstairs. I was talking a minute with Arthur Claxton, the studio director, right outside the door. I looked in, and saw Bartell here, reading over the script. Then, when I came in a minute later, he was gone."

"He couldn't have got past you without your seeing him?"

"No. He couldn't have got out at all—but he was gone. Even if the kidnapers got him out of the room somehow—how did they get him off the lot? There were a dozen cops on duty night before last, because two of the sound stages were in use. All the gates were locked. The fence is too high to climb over. It just couldn't happen, Mr. Oakley—but it did!"

"One other note I have here," Oakley pointed out, "concerns Bartell's car."

"Yes. Bartell drove into the studio and parked behind the building. One of the cops saw his car there just before nine o'clock. The cop noticed that the rumble seat had three or four suitcases in it. After Bartell disappeared, we found the car still there, but the suitcases were gone. I tell you, Mr. Oakley, this is driving me crazy. The police are getting nowhere. I've asked questions myself until I'm losing my mind. Not even Bartell's friends can guess what happened."

"As for instance?"

"Richard Marsh."

"The juvenile who's broadcasting now? They were friends? I thought they were rivals—both the same type and wanting the same parts and—"

"Professionally rivals, yes—but not personally. Marsh and Bartell and Sidney Wheaton share the same dressing room. Bartell didn't seem worried that day, they told me. Of course, he didn't know what was going to happen. The kidnapers must've taken him by surprise—but how they got into the studio, and how they got Bartell out of here, I don't know!"

"Suppose," said Oakley, "I talk with Marsh."

Sartman peered at the electric clock in the monitor room. "He'll be finished in five minutes. We can go in then."

THEY crossed the hall to find a young man in evening dress looking through the glass door of the studio opposite. Sartman absently introduced him as Arthur Claxton, the studio director. In the room beyond, the young actor was reading from a script in a voice that reeked with artificial cultivation.

Claxton smiled and observed to Sartman: "Sounds just like Sidney Wheaton, doesn't he?"

In the hallway a loud-speaker was reproducing Marsh's stagey accent. "And now, dear friends, as I approach the end of my allotted time—"

Suddenly the voice died out of the loud-speaker. Marsh's lips continued to move, but his voice was lost behind the sound-proof walls. Arthur Claxton glanced with quick anxiety at the dead reproducer, then back into the room. Marsh was looking up, troubled, passing a hand across his forehead.

And suddenly—

The thing that happened was paralyzing in its frightfulness. Richard Marsh was jarred from his chair by some explosive force that struck him. His mouth flew open and flame gushed out of it. Smoke spewed out of his nostrils. As reflexing muscles threw him upward, and flung him across the table, wisps of smoke rose from his body.

"Good God!" gasped Claxton. "What's happened?"

Sartman, muttering, thrust at the door. Oakley shouldered in behind him, glancing swiftly about. In the monitor room in the corner of the studio, a technician in shirt-sleeves was half risen from his chair, peering in terror through the double pane of glass, his hands rising automatically to the phones clamped on his ears. Halfway across the studio, Oakley stopped.

The room was stiflingly hot. The air was filled with the stench of burned things—of, Oakley thought, scorched flesh. As he paused Cherry Morris's hand slipped behind his arm. Sartman lumbered across the room with Arthur Claxton and they peered in dismay at the motionless form of the young man stretched across the table.

Smoke still curled up from him into the air. His hands hung limply. From his nostrils and mouth blood was trickling. Sartman backed away from him and gasped a whisper: "Good God, he's dead! Oakley, he's dead!"

"I should think he was dead," Oakley said quietly. "That young man exploded —literally exploded."

CHAPTER TWO

The Bursting Death

OKE OAKLEY crossed the hot, fume-filled room and bent over the smoking body. At his gesture, Sartman fumbled with window catches and thrust sashes upward. Oakley turned to see Arthur Claxton hurrying from the room, his face beaded with perspiration.

"Wait a minute!" Oakley snapped. "Where're you going?"

"The station's off the air," Claxton answered breathlessly. "It's my job to—" He broke off and, dabbing a handkerchief at his face, pushed out the door.

Oakley bent low to peer at the body again. What he saw made him grimace. He straightened toward Cherry Morris. Her face was white, and her eyes widened into Oakley's.

"Better get out into the air, Cherry," he told her. "This is not pretty. This young man's body is split open."

"I," Cherry said in a whisper, "am quite all right, Oke."

"I say!" Archibald Brixey blurted. "You mean he actually burst?"

"Burst is the word. See here, Sartman." Oakley turned. "Call the police. We'll need the medical examiner. And I want Claxton back here at once."

"What in God's name happened to him?" Sartman demanded with an intake of breath.

"I don't know! Get busy!"

Sartman burst out of the studio. Oakley saw faces pressing against the glass of the door; already word had circulated through the building that something had happened. He latched the door, put Brixey in charge of it, and returned to the table where the body of Richard Marsh lay.

"The first rule in a case of this kind, Cherry, my dear," he remarked as he bent over, "is 'Never touch the body.' Which rule I will now proceed to break."

Cherry Morris stood her ground as Oakley went to work. He turned the body face up, and his fingers went red. He did strange things. He pulled up Richard Marsh's trouser legs; he removed one shoe; he loosened the young man's vest and shirt; he inspected the fingers. Seeing that one of Marsh's vest pockets was ripped and charred, he fingered into it.

What he removed was the fragment of a small cardboard box. Blackened as it was, Oakley could make out the name printed on the label—*Madame Midnight.*

A knock at the door brought Oakley up. Sartman and Claxton were outside. At Oakley's signal, Brixey opened the door. The supervisor and the sudio director came in nervously.

"The police are coming, Oakley. God, this is horrible! Did you see—the flame gush out of his mouth and nose? He seemed to—to go off like a fire-cracker!"

"Very much," said Oakley, "like a fire-cracker." He was peering about the table. "Is the station functioning again, Claxton? If so, come here and look and tell me what this means."

Claxton gazed at the microphone and the length of rubber-covered cord which led from it to a plug in the wall. Half the length of the cord was charred, and the insulation had melted onto the floor. The microphone was still hot to the touch.

"Short circuit?" Oakley asked.

"It isn't possible!" Claxton answered. "The microphone leads carry only a low potential—about the same as an ordinary telephone. Even if a high potential got into these wires, somehow—which isn't possible, either—a short circuit couldn't burn the leads only part way. The whole

length would heat up. And anyway—Marsh wasn't touching the microphone at all."

"No go, then," Oakley observed. "But there's a strange thing, Claxton. Marsh's body is covered with burns. There are burns on his insteps, and heels, and calves, and over his chest and abdomen. When the medical examiner looks further, he'll find more, I'm sure. What could have done that?"

"I've no idea!"

"There's no possibility at all that he was killed by a high charge getting into that microphone?"

"None at all—none. I've told you, Oakley, he wasn't even touching the microphone."

"No accident could account for it?"

"I can't conceive—"

"Then," said Oakley, "we may put it down as a fact that Richard Marsh was murdered."

Max Sartman stepped quickly to Oakley. "Murdered? For God's sake—how?"

"How," said Oakley wryly, "and why and what and who are a few details I haven't cleared up yet!" He glanced at the door. "Who's that trying to break in? He looks like Marsh."

Sartman turned. "Marsh's father. He's a radio engineer here. God, it's awful."

"Go out and calm him down," Oakley suggested. "He's got to be kept out of this studio. The rest is up to the police and the medical examiner."

SARTMAN edged out of the room, thrusting back the man who attempted to enter. "My son, my son!" Oakley heard in an anguished voice. With a sigh he stepped to Cherry Morris, fingering the bit of pasteboard that had been part of a box.

"Somewhere in the files in the office, Cherry, you'll find a folder about Madame Midnight," he said. "Look it up and have the dope ready for me when I want it. You know anything about her?"

Cherry's composure had returned. She powdered her patrician nose as she answered. "Only that she's another of the fakirs that infest our fair city, Oke. She specializes in herbs, I believe. The movie people go for her. She sells love potions and what not—stuff that is supposed to make old actors young and young actors irresistible. Am I off now?"

"You're off."

Oakley led her out. Sartman was in the corridor, attempting to calm the father of the dead young actor. The elder Marsh was lean, with bushy hair, and his eyes were now widened wildly. Pale as death, he peered through the glass door and seemed to hear nothing Sartman said. As Cherry Morris hurried down the stairs, Archibald Brixey and Arthur Claxton left the studio. Claxton locked the door behind him.

"Stay on the job until the police get here, Claxton," Oakley directed. "Archie, you're coming with me."

As they turned toward the stairs, a young man ran up to them. That he was another juvenile in the movies was apparent from his appearance. His blond hair was meticulously waved; his color was high; his features perfect. Oakley recognized him as Sidney Wheaton. Wheaton hurried to the door of the studio, where Claxton stopped him short.

"Great Heavens, what's happened to Dick?" he demanded.

"Nobody knows, Sid," Claxton answered. "Maybe it's damned lucky for you you were late tonight."

Oakley pondered over that remark as he went down the stairs with Brixey. Sartman hurried after them, having left William Marsh with Claxton.

"What is happening here?" he demanded, almost hysterically. "First Rex Bartell disappears—then Richard Marsh gets

killed. Two of my three juveniles—it's horrible. Mr. Oakley, what can we do?"

"One thing you can do," Oakley suggested, "is take me to Marsh's dressing room."

"Yes, yes!"

Sartman led the way out the rear door of the radio station. The building which housed it was the highest on the Stupendous lot. Within the walls of the studio streets led past the huge sound stages and executive offices. Company cops were on the prowl as Sartman led the way deeper into the lot.

"I say, Oke," Archibald Brixey spoke up, "are we to believe what you said—that Richard Marsh literally exploded like a fire-cracker?"

"You are. Flame gushed out of his mouth and nose because something inside his body exploded. Naturally, it killed him instantly. What's more, he's covered with strange burns."

"And it's murder?"

"Undoubtedly it's murder. It certainly isn't either suicide, or natural death, and Claxton claims it couldn't be an accident. Therefore, murder. Marsh's father is taking it pretty hard, Sartman."

"Yes, poor chap," Sartman said breathily. "Marsh was his only child. The boy was not very popular in pictures, but he might have become a name in time. He got his start in radio, you know. He was a technician, in New York. Once when a singer didn't show up to broadcast on time, Marsh was rushed in at a moment's notice to take his place. He'd had an audition, but a place hadn't been found for him; and that one chance broadcast started him. He built up a following."

"And from radio he went into pictures."

"Yes. His father has been in charge of the radio research laboratory. Working on direct transmission via short waves for network broadcasts of television."

"Television research going on here?" Oakley asked. "Why?"

SARTMAN laughed wryly. "Ever since Warner Brothers beat out everybody else on the talkies, Hollywood had been grabbing at every new development. We put William Marsh to work here because it was a chance of controlling something big. Television is coming, and his system, if it worked, would put the studio first in the movie field, and save us tremendous expenditure for films."

"How?"

"By broadcasting movies direct to theatres. The players would act here in the studio, and thousands of people, in hundreds of different theatres, could see the same thing at the same time—and the cost of millions of feet of film would be saved. But Marsh has been working on it for years, without getting anywhere. The expense has been too high. The research laboratory will be closed up when Marsh's contract ends in a week."

"Tough on Marsh—losing the lab and his son at the same time," Oakley observed.

"He will be a broken man. Here, Oakley, is the dressing room."

Sartman's passkey opened the door. Lights snapped on to disclose a long room, its walls covered with photographs. Closets standing open disclosed extensive masculine wardrobes. Three dressing tables, framed with glowing bulbs, were lined along one wall.

"Marsh and Bartell and Wheaton used the same room, you see. The farthest one is Marsh's dressing table, and the middle one is Wheaton's."

Oakley looked them over. Sticks of grease paint and bottles of liquid face powder cluttered them up. Unceremoniously Oakley opened drawers. In Marsh's he found nothing out of the ordinary. But as he was fingering through Whea-

ton's he made a noise denoting sudden interest, and picked up a small pasteboard box.

Archibald Brixey leaned close and read aloud the name printed on the label—*"Madame Midnight."*

"Again," said Oakley.

He opened the box. Inside lay a number of large capsules, filled with what seemed to be crushed herbs, brown and dry. Oakley separated one into halves and picked the dusty leaves out. Abruptly he bent close, peering.

"So!" he said.

He removed a small, metallic cylinder from the capsule. It was cup-shaped and just large enough to be inserted into the container and covered with the herbs so that it could not be seen. Oakley's eyes raised to Sartman's.

"Know anything about these things?" he asked.

"Why—" Sartman fumbled with words. "I was in this dressing room only this afternoon. Wheaton and Marsh were here. Marsh was downcast because he'd lost a part to Wheaton in the new picture, *Odds Evened*. Wheaton was trying to cheer him up. And he suggested that Marsh try taking some of those capsules."

"Wheaton urged Marsh to take them?"

"Yes. Marsh laughed at the idea. Wheaton declared he believed in Madame Midnight's herbs. He said the preparations she gave him accounted for his vigor and youthfulness—even his success. He wanted Marsh to try them to see if they'd help. Marsh agreed to do it, not believing in it at all, and Wheaton gave him a full box of the things."

"Sounds exactly like the Hollywood mentality!" Oakley observed sourly. "These movie stars go in for the damnedest beliefs and superstitions you ever heard of. And in Marsh's case, it was just too bad. Very much too bad."

"Why?"

"Because these capsules, Mr. Sartman, contain fulminate caps."

"Ful—"

"Explosive caps. Damned powerful. Taken into the stomach inside the capsules, they would probably stay there. It was one or more of these things, exploding inside Marsh's stomach, that killed him."

"Good Lord, Oakley! But how—how could the things be made to explode?"

"Damn it, I don't know! The fact is that Marsh had swallowed one or more of these miniature infernal machines, and somehow they were set off. As for Wheaton—it looks bad for that young man."

"Wheaton wouldn't do a thing like that! Murder Marsh in that horrible way? No, Oakley! It's—"

"Sartman, beat it back to the broadcasting studios and get Wheaton aside somewhere. I'm coming in and grill him."

"Yes—yes, if you wish."

Sartman breathlessly sidled from the dressing room. Oakley, while Brixey watched, pried open several more of the capsules. In each he found a fulminate cap. Grimly he inspected the label on the box.

"But, I say, Oke," Archie Brixey observed. "If Wheaton were intent on murdering Marsh that way, he wouldn't have given the poor lad the capsules while Sartman was watching, would he?"

"Not unless he thought he was completely covered—and it's a method of murder that's never been used before, Archie, don't forget. But in case Wheaton was sincere, and didn't know the caps were in the herbs, this woman, Madame Midnight, becomes a very interesting person."

OAKLEY opened the door and clicked it behind Brixey. They walked down the dark studio street toward the broadcasting building. The towers reared high

into the sky above them as they entered the open space flanking the rear of the radio station.

Oakley's hand was on the knob when a sudden sound surprised him. Turning, he saw a movement in the darkness behind the building. A vague form was crouching at the rear wall, huddled down. Oakley saw, dimly, a face shaded with the bill of a cap.

"Strange, Oke," said Brixey quickly. "We went right past there a moment ago and there was nobody there."

Oakley stepped aside. "Who's that?" he asked.

And instantly the figure sprang off.

Oakley swung long legs after it. Archibald Brixey saw the figure whisk out of sight at the corner of the building, and darted toward the rear door. He plunged along the hallway, toward the front entrance, as Oakley sprinted past the corner. The dark figure was making a queer, whimpering sound as it ran.

Brixey dashed out the front door as the figure emerged from the gloom beside the building with Oakley in swift pursuit. Brixey leaped to block the way. He reached out to grab, and an amazing thing happened. His face was resoundingly slapped. The nature of the blow startled Brixey so completely that he brought up, arms dropping.

Oakley crashed against him as the figure swerved. His hand shot out, and his fingers closed upon the patterned cap on the fugitive's head. It slipped off in his fingers; and in the light, long, golden hair spilled over the shoulders of the one running.

"A girl!" gasped Brixey.

She was running wildly toward the gate. The studio cop who officiated there heard her quick footfalls and turned to block her way. She shoved at him in desperation; and another slap rang. The next moment she was running through the gate, and across the sidewalk, toward a car waiting at the curb.

Oakley sprinted out. The car, with the girl at the wheel, spurted into the traffic. Oakley wrenched open the door of his roadster and the starter ground. The roadster swung sharply past parked cars and accelerated after the coupe in which the disguised girl was fleeing. Through the window he glimpsed her head, the golden hair streaming down. He jumped a red light to keep her close, then eased down to make it not too apparent that he was following.

"In any other town a cop might stop her," he observed, "but not in this mad hamlet."

"Look here!" Brixey exclaimed. "Are you grilling murder suspects tonight or chasing women dressed like men?"

"Wheaton can wait," Oakley answered. "I want to know why that girl came to the studio dressed in man's clothes. I want to know why she popped out of nowhere behind the broadcasting station. You see, Archie, blondes have an attraction second only to red-heads."

CHAPTER THREE

Hag's Mask

OAKLEY spent half an hour following the coupe through winding roads in Beverly Hills. The girl was driving more slowly now, apparently in the belief that she was not being followed. Along Wilshire Boulevard they rolled, Oakley keeping a safe distance behind. A turn took the girl toward Hollywood, and when she reached the front of a small apartment house she slowed.

Oakley parked a block behind. He saw no movement about the girl's car for long moments. When, finally, the door swung open, and the girl alighted, she was no longer wearing male attire. Garbed in a

smart sports suit, a jaunty hat on her head, she strode to the apartment entrance carrying a small suitcase.

Oakley and Brixey walked along the opposite side of the street after she entered. Presently they saw lights appear in a corner room three stories above the street. Oakley promptly crossed, and entered the apartment house. In an automatic elevator he rode with Brixey to the third floor.

Above the bell button of the corner door was a card. *Alice Westmore,* it read.

"The name," said Oakley, "is slightly familiar."

The knob would not turn. Oakley pressed the button. In a moment he heard quick, soft footfalls on the floor, and the latch clicked.

"Come in, Art!" a girl's voice called. "I'm bathing!"

Oakley looked interested. He opened the door to find the living room empty. The girl's footfalls were crossing the floor of the bedroom beyond. Another latch clicked, and there was the faint sound of streaming water in a tub. The voice called again: "I'll be out in a jiffy!"

"This," said Brixey, "is very embarrassing."

Oakley smiled as he walked into the bedroom beyond. Across the spread lay the suit the girl had been wearing, and silken underthings. A pair of shapely slippers had been kicked into a corner. Beside the bed sat the overnight case. Oakley clicked it open, and saw a man's coat and a pair of trousers rolled up in it.

Inside the bathroom the water kept splashing.

Oakley looked about the dressing table. He lifted a bottle of perfume and breathed of it happily. Its label read—*Seductiv.* Oakley silently agreed and replaced it.

Suddenly the bathroom door clicked. Steam issued out as the girl called: "Art! Aren't you early tonight?"

Oakley sighed again. "I regret very much," he said, "that neither of us is named Art."

There was a gasp from the bathroom. The shower stopped streaming. The girl peered out through the crack of the door. Only one side of her face was visible, and a section of towel which she had draped around herself, and beneath it a shapely, nude leg.

"Why, I— Who are you? What do you want?" she asked quickly. "How dare you—"

"Miss Westmore," sighed Oakley, "we are sorry that business brings us here at such an inopportune time. You see, I am a private detective. I am very interested in your recent appearance on the Stupendous lot dressed as a man. You're not working there, are you?"

The girl gasped again. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Now, really," said Brixey. "You do, quite."

"Is," asked Oakley, "an explanation forthcoming?"

"Why should an explanation be forthcoming to you, may I ask?" the girl retorted. "You might explain why you've invaded my bedroom. No, don't explain. Just get out!"

"But I will explain," Oakley persisted. "The matter involves a kidnaping and a murder."

"A—"

"Murder. A particularly nasty murder. Richard Marsh exploded in the broadcasting studio tonight, and since you made such a strange appearance and disappearance there immediately afterward—"

"Dick Marsh! Mur—"

"Oke," sighed Brixey as the girl stammered into silence, "it is obvious that the young lady is not implicated. I am be-

coming more painfully embarrassed every moment. I suggest we leave."

"On the other hand, I suggest," said Oakley to the girl behind the door, "that you come out and talk the matter over."

"I won't come out!"

"We will stay," Oakley countered, "until you do come out."

"I'll stay here until you go!"

Oakley sighed. "That obviously brings us to an impasse. I won't go until you come out, and you won't come out until we go, and I'm afraid that if we persist, nothing will ever come of it. One of us must unbend. Suppose, then, I behave more like a gentleman and come back later, at a time when you are not in the tub."

The girl began to sob softly. "Please don't come back," she plead. "Please don't!"

"I'm sorry," said Oakley. "I must. Good night."

He left the bedroom with Brixey at his heels. Closing the door, he breathed one last time the fragrance of *Seductiv*. They rode in silence to the ground floor and walked in silence to the car. Oakley's eyes were troubled when he started off.

"I remember her name. Several years ago she was in pictures, but she dropped out all of a sudden. There was something about an accident she suffered which kept her from going on."

Brixey glanced up at the shining windows as they passed.

"She is," he said softly, "a very luscious young lady—what I saw of her."

OAKLEY parked at the curb in front of KSPS. Uniformed policemen eyed him as he passed the gate. In the lobby he found more policemen and plainclothesmen. Ignoring them, he wriggled into a phone booth and called the number listed under *Secrets, Inc.*—his office.

"Cherry, darling," he said when the connection went through, "Oke wants to know what you've learned about Madame Midnight."

"Not much more than I've already told you," Cherry Morris answered. "She opened up shop about a year ago. Stars began coming to her and made her famous. Some of the biggest names in Hollywood drink tea made from herbs she sells them. Have no dope on the woman whatever—where she came from, or what her right name is. Want the address of her place?"

Oakley jotted it down.

"Since you need no beauty naps, Cherry, here's a job for you. A young lady named Alice Westmore has caught my fancy—professionally only, of course. I want your gorgeous blue eyes kept on her until I can question her outside of a bathtub. Better skip over there right away." And Oakley told her where to go.

"A red-head?" asked Cherry.

"A blonde," said Oakley.

"Then I've still got a chance."

Oakley grinned as he left the booth. With Brixey he climbed the stairs. There was a crowd in the studio where the mysterious death of Richard Marsh had occurred, but the body had been removed. Oakley edged in to find Sartman there, with Claxton, and Sidney Wheaton, and a mass of brawn known as Detective Lieutenant McClane. The plainclothesman grinned sourly at Oakley.

"Try to figure this one out, shamus!" he greeted. "Or maybe you have already."

"Not quite. See here, McClane. I've helped you out in the past, and I'd like a little reciprocity. What's been learned?"

"Little or nothing. If I'm to believe eye-witnesses and the medical examiner, this bird Marsh simply exploded. Inside of him is a mess. Died instantly. And as for burns on his body—listen.

"On the insteps, little round burns in

two rows, running parallel with the foot. On the heels, little dots of burns. On both calves, triangular burns. On the abdomen, a square burn. On the thighs, round burns. On his chest, a hole was blown into him. On his neck, a round burn in the front and another in back. None of 'em very deep, and they couldn't've killed him, but all those funny burns are queer."

Oakley nodded. "Anything else?"

"No. What do you know?"

"I saw it happen. The radio power failed at the exact moment Marsh died. When we went into the room, it was hot as blazes, but you see the heat's not turned on. That's all I can contribute at the moment."

OAKLEY detached himself from McClane. His gaze centered on a young man sitting miserably at the side of the room—Sidney Wheaton. Wheaton looked worn; his pleading eyes kept to Max Sartman. Sartman merely shrugged and sighed as Oakley came near.

"See here." Oakley bent close over Wheaton so that his voice would not carry. "Have you any idea what killed Marsh?"

"No—of course not."

"He died at about twenty-six minutes past the hour. About ten minutes before you came into the studio. Where were you then?"

"I—I was in Santa Monica. I was driving to the studio from the beach, and I ran over a broken milk bottle, and both right tires of my car were punctured. I must have been there at the time—held up."

"How about proving it?"

"You can check up on the garage I phoned. The Speedee, on Wilshire. They came to get my car, and I went ahead in a taxi. Why—why are you asking that? For God's sake, you don't think I had anything to do—"

Oakley opened a hand near Wheaton's face. On it lay the little cardboard box labeled *Madame Midnight.*

"These yours?"

Wheaton looked dazed. "Yes. I suppose so. Where—"

"Suppose you take one. Archie! A glass of water, please, for Mr. Wheaton."

The young actor shifted uneasily in his chair as Brixey shouldered from the studio. Oakley watched his reaction keenly. From the box he removed a capsule—one which, he was sure, contained a fulminate cap. When Brixey returned with a brimming glass, he passed the capsule to Wheaton with the water.

Wheaton placed the thing on his tongue. He was about to sluice it down when Oakley gripped his wrist.

"That's far enough," he said. "Spit it out!"

Wheaton looked amazed. He brought the capsule from his mouth. Oakley took it, frowning, and turned to Brixey. Leaving the juvenile peering after him puzzledly, he strode to the door with Brixey at his side.

"Come along, Archie," he said crisply. "The night's just begun."

He said nothing more until his roadster was purring along Santa Monica Boulevard. It was late, but the thoroughfare was still streaming with cars. Hollywood's lights glared in the sky as Oakley wheeled past corners, turning toward Culver City.

"You seem to have lost interest in young Wheaton, Oke," Brixey observed.

"The young man either doesn't know there are fulminate caps in the herbs, Archie," Oakley answered, "or he's a far better actor than he's given credit for."

"I watched him when he began to swallow the capsule," Brixey put in. "Maybe if he knew the explosive was inside, he

had nothing to worry about. Those things have to be set off somehow, you know, and if he simply didn't set off the one he was about to swallow—"

"There," Oakley interrupted, "is the well-known rub. Those things have to be set off. How could it have been done? Usually a fuse is used, but obviously there was no fuse in this case. Anyway, at the time of Marsh's death, Wheaton wasn't anywhere near the studio. And, lastly, we have no idea of why he would want to kill Marsh.'"

"Which leaves us nowhere," said Brixey. "Where, may I ask, are we going?"

"We're going," explained Oakley, "to pay a visit to Madame Midnight."

OAKLEY stopped at the curb on a street which was not yet built up. Only a few houses spotted the block. Near his car sat a squat, square building, perhaps once intended to be a store. Its front window was curtained with black cloth, behind which there was a dim gleam of light.

Oakley noticed, as he trod to the door, that there was another car parked ahead of him at the curb. He stopped to read a card behind the pane—*Madame Midnight. Hours, Twelve Midnight to Three A. M.*

"Hocus-pocus," said Oakley. "Archie, grace the landscape with your presence until I come out."

"Pshaw!" Archie deplored. "Am I not to meet the lady?"

"You're to keep an eye on possible visitors."

Oakley knocked. There was no answer so he turned the knob and pushed the door open. He stepped into air thick with the fumes of incense—yet it was a pungent scent unlike any he had smelled before. The room was draped with black cloth which was covered with glittering, silver symbols of the zodiac. And in the ceiling, above, light issued from a replica of the full moon.

Except for a table and two chairs, the room was unfurnished. The black curtains hung all around. Through them came the sound of something boiling, and Oakley sensed that he was smelling the vapor of some herbaceous brew. He waited, and presently the black curtains at the rear of the room parted, and a face looked out.

It was the face of a hag. A black shawl bound the head, and from it strayed wisps of coarse unkempt hair. The dark, mottled skin looked age-old; the eyes sagged, the mouth drooped. Oakley said nothing while the woman regarded him coldly.

"What do you want?"

"Madame Midnight?"

"What do you want?"

"I am in trouble. I need help."

The woman seemed to stiffen. "No," she droned. "Not tonight. I cannot help you."

She turned, and the black curtains flipped into place, blotting away her mask of a face.

Oakley muttered maledictions. "But I want you to help me. Can't you give me something to help me?"

Through the curtains came, "Go away! Go away!"

Oakley reached out and lifted the curtain. There was an old stove in the rear room, and the woman was bending over it. A huge iron pot was bubbling, and vapors were rising from it. The woman, fullish in loose skirts, was stirring the mixture. On the walls around her were shelves loaded with bottles and small boxes like the one Oakley had found in the Stupendous juveniles' dressing room.

The woman sensed the movement of the curtains and turned on him.

"Stay out! Go away!" she screeched. "I'll call the police if you don't go away!"

Oakley backed. "I'm sorry. I only came

for help. I feel so low in spirit, I—I'm afraid. Everything has gone wrong. Fortune has turned against me. I've even thought of taking my life because it looks so hopeless. If you won't help me—" he ended with a shrug.

The woman was peering at him, the dripping spoon in her hands. Oakley felt uncomfortable under her stare. She said, in a husky tone: "Then all right. Sit down. I will see if I can help you."

OAKLEY waited in a chair. The cauldron in the rear room kept bubbling and steaming. The hag-woman came through the drapes, and seated herself on the opposite side of the table. She gestured for Oakley's palm, and he spread his hand before her.

She studied the lines silently, her head bent low. "Yes—yes, you are facing grave misfortune. It is because you are not equal to the tasks put upon you. Your mind and body need stimulation."

"Yes—you are right," Oakley said, spurring her on.

"I cannot help you if you do not believe."

"I believe that you can help me."

"I will give you herbs. You are to make tea with them. Three times a day drink the tea and—"

Oakley was smiling. Peering at the darkly mottled face, he chuckled. The woman's head jerked up and the shaded eyes peered into his, startled.

"Not bad, Miss Westmore," Oakley said. "Not bad at all."

A choking sound came from the woman's throat as she tensed to spring from the table. Oakley reached out quickly. His hand snatched at the shawl which covered the woman's head as she whirled away. And again, as she rushed to the rear door, Oakley saw flowing, golden hair spill into sight.

Oakley leaped for the curtains. He brushed through them as a door in the rear of the kitchen slammed. He sprang at it, and pushed—and found it fastened. Behind the door were quick voices. Oakley pounded a fist.

"Open up!"

Another door slammed. Someone had hurried out a rear entrance. Oakley whirled, dashed back—and stopped short at the street door through which he had entered. It resisted his effort to open it.

"Archie!" Oakley shouted. "Stop that woman!"

Somewhere outside he heard a moan. It was followed quickly by the snarl of a motor. A car spurted away from the curb, not far off, went racing down the street as Oakley struggled with the door.

"Archie!"

There was no answer. Oakley turned angrily, trod back to the kitchen, and found the rear way still locked. Jerking aside more black drapes he found windows, all of them nailed down. He snatched up a chair which sat beside the stove and thrust its legs against the panes. Glass cracked. Oakley broke his way clear, and stepped over the sill.

"Archie!"

This time there was another moan. Oakley rounded the little building quickly. The car which had rushed off was the one that had been parked in front of his. It was out of sight now. Oakley's attention shifted quickly to a figure squatting on the sidewalk.

It was Archibald Brixey, sitting and holding his head. Oakley grabbed his collar and jerked him up.

"What the devil happened to you? Why didn't you stop that woman?"

"He hit me, Oke!"

"Who hit you? I wanted that woman! It was Alice Westmore—the luscious young thing we surprised having her bath. Made up as a hag and selling herbs."

Brixey sighed. "I shall have to quit my job, Oke, really I shall. My skull can't stand it."

"Damnation!" Oakley boomed. "Archie, gather your wits! Did you catch the number of that car? Answer me!"

"I really am trying, Oke," Brixey sighed. "It was that girl—that delightful blonde? Dear me, what is she up to? How did you know it was she?"

"Simply because the old hag had the fragrance of *Seductiv* perfume about her. I caught it even through the smell of that damned mess she was cooking on the stove. I took a chance, that's all, and it worked. This thing is connecting up!"

"It's jolly well connecting up!" Brixey sighed. "I saw the face of the man who hit me, Oke. He came out of the rear of that place and when I made a pass at him he knocked me down, and my head hit a stone. It was that chap we met at the studio tonight—the studio director. What's his name—Arthur Claxton."

"Claxton?"

"Claxton," said Brixey.

Oakley snorted. "Something's damned funny. Archie, get into that car and drive to the apartment house where the girl lives. Find Cherry and demand to know how that girl managed to slip past her. Then camp there yourself. When that girl shows up again you grab her. I'll look for Claxton myself."

"Very well, Oke. I wish," moaned Archie as he moved toward the car, "I had an aspirin."

OAKLEY went back into the black sanctum of Madame Midnight as Brixey rolled off in the roadster. Legging across the sill of the broken window, he regarded the shelves filled with bottles and small boxes. He opened several of the containers, found them filled with black pills, and searched further.

The girl, Alice Westmore, had recognized him immediately, of course—he realized that. Hence her refusal to see him. On his insistence, she had yielded in the hope that it would mean less trouble—that was obvious. Claxton, of course, had been waiting in the rear room; the car at the curb had been his. Oakley mulled it over as he snatched open boxes.

He found one containing huge capsules, like those identified with Sidney Wheaton. He parted the capsules and picked the herbs out of them. They contained nothing but dry, brown leaves. Oakley settled down to a thorough investigation. He pried into every capsule, into every box he could find. But in none of them was there more than dried herbs.

He was crawling out the window again, disgusted, when he saw his roadster roll to a stop at the curb. Cherry Morris was at the wheel. As he climbed in, she fluffed her hair in place with a gesture of annoyance.

"I understand," she said, "you have made unkind remarks about me."

"You let that girl slip past you."

"She was gone, really, Oke, before I got there. Her windows were dark. I've been on the job ever since, but she didn't show up. Men," she added, "can be so unkind."

Oakley settled down in the seat as the car started, and gazed at Cherry's colorful hair fluttering brilliantly in the reflected glow of the dash. His hand closed warmly on hers.

"Not," he said, "for long."

CHAPTER FOUR

Heat From Hell

BRIGHT California sunshine streamed through the windows of the sanctum sanctorum of Secrets, Inc., as Clay Oakley sat at his desk next morning, poring over sheets of notes taken from his files.

In an easy chair Archibald Brixey, a lump on the side of his head, was relaxed in sleep. He jerked when the telephone rang.

Oakley took the call.

"This is your undying passion calling, darling," came the voice of Cherry Morris. "I am still camped near the Westmore girl's apartment house. I've eaten forty chocolate sodas so far, and six men have tried to pick me up. There's nothing doing anywhere, except a faint uneasiness behind the belt."

"Swell!" said Oakley sourly. "I've just had KSPS on the phone, and they're going crazy over there trying to locate Claxton. He hasn't shown up. Well, honey, parade your lovely feet up and down that sidewalk some more, and keep watching."

"Though my lovely feet are full of unlovely aches, Oke, I'll do anything you ask."

Brixey yawned resoundingly as Oakley pushed the phone back. "Now that I've had a sleep on this," he announced, "it's in a worse muddle than it was before."

"Then drink lots of coffee," Oakley retorted. "Archie, this murder is getting in my hair. I didn't go to that studio to find out why a young actor gets blown mysteriously to pieces. I went there to locate the missing Rex Bartell. We seem to have overlooked that."

"But surely," said Brixey, "the two are linked together. First one young actor vanishes, and then another bursts with a loud noise. There seem to be dark designs on the Stupendous juveniles."

Oakley fingered the fulminate cap he had found inside one of the herb capsules. "Very nasty, Archie," he said, "one of these things going off inside of one. And the fact that we know several of these things, exploding in Marsh's stomach, killed him, is only part of the answer. The most important thing is—who made it go off, and how?"

"They don't explode spontaneously?"

"No, certainly not. A blow will explode them, or heat applied, or open flame, which amounts to almost the same thing. Obviously, a blow couldn't have set off the one or more of them that were in Marsh's stomach. There's no way that I know of that it could have been exploded. Yet that murder, Archie, was committed according to plan."

"Plan?"

"Certainly. First, these things were introduced into Marsh's body without his being aware of it. Secondly, somehow, they were exploded. Just why that outlandish means of murder was chosen is beyond me at the moment, except that it could be done without the murderer's being present. Marsh was alone in that room—absolutely alone."

"And all at once—*pop!*" said Archie.

"*Pop,*" said Oakley, "and he was dead in an instant."

The phone rang again as he spoke. An excited voice came over the wire. "Oakley? This is Sartman talking—Max Sartman. I've received another letter—a threatening letter—"

"From Rex Bartell's kidnapers?"

"Yes. It instructs me to put the hundred thousand dollars in a bundle, and charter the advertising blimp that's always sailing over this city. It says for the blimp to fly from Santa Monica Beach south to Oceanside, above the beach road, tonight, and that I'm to toss the money overboard when I see a light flash seven times."

"That's a hell of a way," Oakley exclaimed. "Any bird who tries to pick up that money will get caught. A car can follow that blimp easily."

"But the letter says if there's any interference, Bartell will be killed. Oakley, what can we do? God knows few actors

are worth that much money, let alone Bartell, with as many juveniles running around without jobs as they are—but I can't have that boy's blood on my head."

"Regardless, plan to go through with it. Have that car trailed by headquarters men. Make 'em grab anybody who tries to get the money, and it might as well be fake money at that. If anybody's picked up, those cops'll make him talk. In the meantime I'm coming over to the radio station to look the place over. I'd like to meet you there in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, yes! I'll be here."

OAKLEY, signaling Archie, stepped out of the office and locked the door behind him. Crossing Hollywood Boulevard into the parking space beside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where banners were fluttering in the sea air, he climbed into the roadster. Neither Oakley nor Brixey spoke as they crossed to Santa Monica Boulevard and drove toward the Stupendous Productions lot.

The studio cop at the gate admitted them. They entered the ornate lobby to find Max Sartman pacing the carpet. He came to them wringing pudgy hands.

"I will do as you say, Oakley," he declared. "If we get that boy back safe—what a relief! And what publicity! It's all over the country in the papers—Bartell's being kidnaped. We've got a bushel of telegrams from women begging us to get him back safe. What publicity!"

"I thought you'd realize that sooner or later," Oakley observed. "See here, Sartman. If this is one of your press-agents' stunts to work up a little notoriety for an actor—"

"No!" Sartman exclaimed. "It is nothing like that! I swear it! The boy has been kidnaped."

"All right," Oakley retorted. "Where's Claxton? Has he shown up yet?"

"No—no, he has disappeared, too. We can't find him anywhere. Oakley, for God's sake, what is happening here?"

"Don't worry about Claxton. He'll show up sooner or later. I want to go to the studio where Marsh died."

"Yes. Right—"

"Mr. Sartman!"

Sidney Wheaton came running down the stairs, calling the supervisor's name. His face was flushed with anger, his movements quick. He strode to face Sartman with fists clenched.

"You gave me the part, and now you're kicking me out of it? Is that fair? Haven't I earned it? Have you anybody better for the part? I won't stand for that kind of treatment, Mr. Sartman! My public knows I was given that part—"

"My boy." Sartman placed what was intended to be a soothing hand on Wheaton's shoulder. "We are switching you to a better part, aren't we? You are losing nothing. What difference—"

"I refuse to be changed over!" Wheaton snapped. "It is my part! Who could you put into it that—"

"We are postponing the picture a little, Wheaton. We must use you in the meantime. Perhaps, when the picture begins, we will put Rex Bartell in the part—"

"So that's it!" the juvenile almost screeched. "You're postponing the picture until after Bartell is back. You're going to capitalize the publicity he's getting—all that rotten notoriety! You want to get your hundred thousand dollars worth of free advertising! You have no regard for acting ability—you put Bartell in my part. That's despicable, Mr. Sartman! That's—"

"Now, now!" Sartman's face was flushed. "You go up into Claxton's office, and I'll talk with you about it. Not now. I must take Mr. Oakley—"

"Nothing is more important to me than this now, Mr. Sartman! I'll tear up my

contract! I won't stand for such treatment!" Wheaton's voice was still screeching. "We'll settle this right now—right now!"

Sartman sighed. "Very well, Wheaton. Excuse me, Oakley. I—I must—"

He broke off in confusion. Wheaton paced back and forth, in a turmoil of anger

"In Claxton's office, Wheaton," Sartman plead again.

The juvenile ran up the stairs. Sartman shrugged at Oakley. "What can I do with these temperamental kids? All of them think they're the best actors in the world. Wheaton—he's the worst I ever saw. You heard him say 'my public.' When an actor begins to talk about 'his' public, he's half crazy."

"A very interesting and tempestuous young man," Oakley observed. "And ambitious. Perhaps, after all, I'd better talk with him again."

"Yes—if you like. Go ahead. I'll wait until he's calmed down."

OAKLEY climbed the steps, and turned forward. With Brixey beside him, and Sartman following, he walked toward a door labeled *Studio Director*. He pushed in to find the reception room empty. An adjoining door was open, and through it Oakley could see Wheaton angrily pacing back and forth in front of a desk.

Oakley half crossed the office—and stopped. He jerked stiff in his tracks. For the thing happened with paralyzing suddenness.

Wheaton turned quickly, peering around. Breath went into his lungs sharply as a puzzled expression crossed his face. And the next instant—

A muffled explosion sounded in the inner office. A tongue of flame licked out of Wheaton's mouth, gushed from his nose. For an instant he seemed to be a rigid image filled with fire. He made pawing, clutching motions in the air, and toppled forward. And when he struck the carpet he lay flat, motionless—smoke whirling up from his body!

"Good God!" Sartman burst out. *"God!"*

A scream sounded in the inner office as Oakley leaped through. Immediately he felt again an intense heat in the room, suffocating and close; and it was filled with the nauseating odor of scorched flesh. The scream sounded again as he stopped at the prostrate body. It came from a girl—blond, wide-eyed, frightened—who had risen from a typewriter desk near where Wheaton had been pacing.

She blurted: "My typewriter got hot! All of a sudden! It burned me!"

Oakley glanced at the desk on which the machine was sitting. Fumes were rising from it. Oakley gestured Brixey to take care of the girl, and bent over Wheaton.

He turned the young man face up. Wheaton's condition was a thing of horror. The mouth was torn, the nostrils scorched black. Smoke was weaving up from the broken cavity of the chest. The power of the explosion had literally burst Wheaton open. Bones lay stripped of their flesh, and both Wheaton's arms had been blown almost off—they dangled to the body on torn ligaments. And from the entire body fumes oozed.

Oakley straightened, grim and cold. "Dead," he said. "He got it worse than Marsh."

The telephone rang shrilly. Oakley ignored it, and turned away. Brixey was forcing the secretary into an adjoining office and closing the door; the girl was staring at the horror on the floor and babbling hysterically.

Oakley snapped at Sartman: "Get the police in here again! Take another phone. I'll answer this one."

As Sartman, stunned and moving automatically, strode through the outer door, Oakley took up the desk instrument.

"Mr. Oakley, please."

"Cherry? Oke talking!"

"Oke!" The girl's voice rang with excitement. "They've come back—both of them. Claxton and Alice Westmore just went into the apartment house. They ducked out of their car as though they wanted to avoid being seen. Better snap it up if you want 'em."

"Lord, what a time for them to show up!" Oakley moaned. "Cherry, if they start to leave before I get there, and there's no other way of stopping 'em, call a cop and have 'em arrested. I'll clear out of here as soon as I can—"

He hung up while talking, and peered again at the form on the floor. Sobbing noises were coming from the adjoining room. Oakley pushed through the door. Claxton's secretary was blurting unintelligible sounds into a handkerchief.

"It's quite true," said Archie. "She was burned. Not only the hand that touched the typewriter, but her—on the thighs, just above the knees. In, you might say, the position of her garters. She—ah—showed me."

"Some guys get all the breaks," Oakley said sourly as he went back and bent over the typewriter.

The machine still felt hot to the touch. Every inch of the black enamel on it was blistered. The celluloid disks on the keys were charred. Oakley went back to the adjoining room, took the secretary's right hand, inspected the burns, and let it go at that. "As long as you'll vouch for the others, Archie," he explained.

He reentered the office where Sidney Wheaton lay dead. A door swung open as Sartman entered from the hall. The fattish supervisor was mopping at his sweat-beaded face and breathing hard.

"I got McClane. He's coming. God, I could hardly talk. It's the same thing all over again, Oakley—the same thing!"

"Not quite," Oakley answered. "I'd just about decided Wheaton was behind the murder of Richard Marsh, when this happened. Wrong hunch. No doubt of his innocence now, because he got it the same way Marsh did—which is God knows how. Poor chap."

"Oakley—the third juvenile is gone!" Sartman was staring. "One kidnaped—two killed. What can it mean?"

"More than I can tell you at the moment. I've chased hunches on this case and got nowhere. There's just one lead left, Sartman—just one, and I've got to follow that fast. I can't stay here. You've got to tell McClane about this until I get back. Archie!"

Brixey's head came out the door.

"If you want a chance to return the clip you got on the head last night, come with me!"

They bounded down the stairs three steps at a time, headed for the roadster at the curb.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blind-Alley Clues

OAKLEY braked to a stop directly in front of the apartment house in Hollywood where Alice Westmore lived. He noted grimly that the car sitting ahead of his at the curb was the same which had been parked in front of Madame Midnight's establishment the night before. He slipped from the wheel as light footfalls tapped on the pavement.

Cherry Morris pattered across the street. "They're upstairs now, Oke," she informed her boss. "Better get up there in a hurry. The bedroom light just went out, and that looks like they are getting ready to leave."

"Stick around, darling," Oakley an-

swered briskly, "and we may celebrate the capture of a murderer and a murderess by having a hamburger sandwich together."

"You're too good to me," she observed as Oakley strode into the apartment lobby.

Cherry Morris remained in the door as Brixey entered the automatic elevator beside Oakley. Oakley gave a tap at the automatic nestling under his left arm. He was reaching for the button which would start the cage toward the third floor, when gears whirred somewhere, and the car began to move.

Oakley was satisfied to ride with it. His satisfaction became keener when the cage stopped at the third-floor level. The door slid open quickly; and Oakley's hand slipped to his automatic.

Arthur Claxton stood in the light, a suitcase in each hand. Behind him was the girl, Alice Westmore, blond and lovely. Something like a gasp came from her when she saw Oakley.

Oakley kept the gun inside his coat and said: "Sorry to interrupt your leave-taking.. I suggest you go back."

Claxton blurted angrily: "See here, Oakley—"

"Go," said Oakley with a snap, "back!"

A sob came from the girl's lips. Claxton straightened, his face suffused with wrath. The pair exchanged a glance of hopelessness, and turned without a word. Oakley nudged them to the corner door. The girl unlocked it. Oakley followed them in and Brixey clicked the latch behind him.

"Now," he said, "let's talk."

"Oakley, don't be a damned fool!" Claxton exclaimed. "Alice and I have nothing whatever to do—"

Oakley was studying the girl's face, and feeling pity for her. She had been a very beautiful girl, but on one cheek was a livid scar. The disfigurement was a surprise to Oakley. Through the bathroom door, the night before, he had seen only the opposite side of her face; and the grease-paint of the Madame Midnight masquerade had blotted it over. The girl's sensitive features reddened as Oakley looked at it.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Must ask questions. Where are you two heading?"

"We—I was only taking Alice away until this thing blows over," Claxton answered stiffly.

"Why?"

"Because she has nothing whatever to do with it. God, Oakley, you're making a mess of this thing! Are you crazy enough to think that Alice had a hand in Marsh's death?"

"I'm crazy enough to follow hot leads when I have 'em," Oakley answered. "Now, let's sit down and act civilized. You've got a hell of a lot of explaining to do. Shall we?"

Alice Westmore was gazing at Oakley resolutely. "We'd better, Art," she said. "We've got to make a clean breast of it, even if—"

"Good girl," said Oakley. "Who starts?"

The girl said firmly: "I will." She sat down and lighted a cigarette. Claxton paced. "I'll explain why—why that little episode transpired last night."

"I'm listening."

"You see—" The girl hesitated. "Two years ago I was just getting my start in pictures. I think I had a future—I was told so. I had looks, and I could act a little, but the looks were far the more important of the two. Then—a year or so ago—I was in an automobile accident—"

THE girl shuddered as she remembered it. "The car I was driving ran into another on the road to Malibu. My windshield was non-shatterable, but the other car's wasn't. It flew to pieces as the two

cars sideswiped, and some of the flying glass struck my face. You see—the result of the cut."

"Regrettable—very," said Archie Brixey sympathetically.

"The scar that was left," Alice Westmore continued, "ruined my chances in pictures. Of course, I couldn't get another job. Well, I had no money. I haven't any folks, either. It was up to me to make a go of it myself, somehow, and I preferred to stay in Hollywood. So, in desperation—in order to earn enough money to get along on—I became Madame Midnight."

"I see. There was no other way?"

"No other way that would let me—hide my face," the girl explained. "You see, I was born and raised in the Southwest. My nurse was an Indian woman. She doctored the men on the ranch with herbs, and as I grew up she told me all her secrets. I remembered all that, and decided to use my knowledge. I got friends of mine to send me the herbs, and I began to sell them.

"Sometimes they helped the people who came to me. At least, there was a helpful psychological effect. My business grew, and I began to make money. I was satisfied to keep it up—anyway, I could do nothing else. I've kept to myself by day, and at night I've been Madame Midnight, selling herbs to movie people who had fame that was denied me because of this—scar."

"Very well," said Oakley gently. "I understand that much. But—you knew Richard Marsh and Sidney Wheaton? Wheaton, you know, was killed tonight, only a short time ago, in the same horrible way. If you—"

"Good Lord, Wheaton too?" Claxton exclaimed. "See here, Oakley. I was at the studio last night, and Sartman told me about the box of capsules you'd found in Wheaton's dressing table. I knew you'd be following up that Madame Midnight lead. My only intention was to keep Alice out of it—I had to do that."

"Romance," sighed Archie.

"Alice is dependent on her Madame Midnight shop for a living. I felt that if you began to investigate her, and learned who she really is, the whole thing would be blown up. She'd have no more clients. That was my only reason for going to the shop and warning her, Oakley—believe me!"

"Does no one else know she is Madame Midnight?"

"I've kept it a secret from everyone except my two closest friends," the girl answered. "Arthur and Rex Bartell."

"Ah?" said Oakley. "So, Claxton, when you heard about the box of capsules I found, you beat it to warn Madame Midnight, Miss Westmore. And when I came and found out who she really was, due to the exquisite perfume she uses, you were so desperate that—"

"Don't you see, Oakley?" Claxton demanded. "I was willing to do anything to keep you from linking her with the murders. That would be far worse than simply ruining her business. I was desperate, yes. I took Alice away from there, with the intention of keeping her in hiding until the case blew over—until you found the real murderer, and she could come back without facing disaster."

"Not quite wise," Oakley commented. "And not quite understandable. Miss Westmore is a charming and attractive young woman, in spite of her slight disfigurement. She would have no need to keep up the hocus-pocus of the Madame Midnight shop if, say, she married a successful young man."

Alice Westmore's face flushed. Claxton looked sheepish.

"I have begged Alice to marry me and leave all that behind," he explained, "but

she won't have me. She doesn't love me. It's—"

"Rex Bartell? Then, Miss Westmore," Oakley asked, "why not marry Rex Bartell?"

"Oakley, leave her alone!" Claxton snapped. "You're going too far!"

"I'll explain," the girl answered. "Rex, you see, is only just getting a start in pictures. Whether or not his options will be taken up is always a question. He has been told that his next one will not be. That means Rex will be out of a job—and since he is no better off than most young actors, it means that we'd starve if we married, probably. And Rex will simply not marry me until he is able to provide a decent living."

"Very commendable, too," remarked Brixey.

"Which explains why I have continued to be Madame Midnight, and all the rest."

"Not quite all the rest. It doesn't explain why you popped out of nowhere on the Stupendous lot last night, dressed in man's clothes, and made a desperate attempt to escape us," Oakley pointed out.

ALICE WESTMORE came quickly to her feet. "Mr. Oakley, I swear to you that I know nothing about Richard Marsh's death—or Sidney Wheaton's. Whatever I've done has no connection. Please, please, believe me—and let me alone!"

"The fact remains," said Oakley calmly, coming also to his feet, "that both young men died because fulminate caps exploded inside them, and the caps were contained inside capsules of herbs which came from your shop."

"Good Lord—Alice didn't put them in!" Claxton exclaimed. "Why should she? She scarcely knew Marsh and Wheaton! Why should she want to kill them?"

"I can't answer that question, and you haven't answered mine," Oakley remarked. "Why were you on the Stupendous lot last night, dressed in man's clothes. Where did you come from when I saw you first, and why were you so desperate to get away?"

"I—I can't tell you that!" the girl cried. "But please believe me, it—I—" And she sobbed, pressing a handkerchief to her face.

Arthur Claxton pushed a threatening finger at Oakley. "Oakley, get out of here! Leave Alice alone! If you implicate her in this dirty case, I'll beat you to a pulp!"

Archibald Brixey stepped forward. "See here, my good man," he said. "Mr. Oakley rarely handles such matters as you have just brought up. He refers them to his Fisticuff Department. I," he explained, "am the Fisticuff Department, and ready to function."

Smiling, Oakley rose and gestured the irate Brixey back. "It's all right, Archie," he said. "Suppose we take the hint and depart. Provided," he added, turning to the girl, "I have your promise not to run away. I'll keep quiet about this if you'll stay here."

The girl dried her eyes resolutely. "I won't run away again," she said. "I promise that."

"Then, Archie," said Oakley, "let's take our leave."

The amazed Brixey watched Oakley step out the door. He gave one last glance at the girl, and followed. Riding down in the automatic elevator he regarded Oakley in surprise.

"Have you parted company with your senses?" he inquired. "Can you actually believe that neither the girl nor Claxton is mixed up in the murders?"

"Silly as it sounds, Archie, I believe it," Oakley answered as the car stopped and he stepped out. "Which leaves us with no more leads to follow. The case of

the bursting deaths is as much of a puzzle now as it ever was."

Cherry Morris took Oakley's arm as they crossed the sidewalk to the car. "How about the hamburger?" she asked.

"No murderers, no hamburger," Oakley answered. "Cherry, grab a taxi, go home, and rest those shapely feet of yours. Archie and I are wallowing in uncertainty and we must work the night through. Please brighten the office with your resplendent hair at the usual time in the morning.

He drove off with Cherry gazing after him hungrily. Without talking he wound his way to the entrance of Radio Station KSPS and the Stupendous lot. Brixey followed him through the gate and the neon-decorated door of the building.

Again Oakley found the place overrun with patrolmen and plainclothesmen. They allowed him to pass up the stairs. In Claxton's office he found Sartman pacing the carpet.

"Hello—where's McClane?" Oakley asked. "I expected to find him grilling hell out of somebody."

"He's doing it—upstairs," Sartman answered wearily. "I tried to keep him from it, but I couldn't. The way he's been handling that poor old man—"

"Who?"

"William Marsh—Richard Marsh's father. As though the man killed his own son in that horrible way!"

OAKLEY sighed and went out the door. He climbed carpeted stairs into a long corridor which ran along the rear wall of the third floor of the broadcasting building. Three doors opened into it, and one of them was standing ajar.

McClane's voice was booming out: "Somebody's got to know why the station went off the air when those kid actors were killed! Come on—come clean!"

"I don't know—I don't know," was the moaning answer.

Oakley entered a bizarre room. Its walls were covered with black composition panels. On them small bulbs were glowing at dull red heat; meters were flickering; switches and fuses glittered in the light. This was the master control room of the studio, and two men were keeping their attention on the panels as best they could with McClane's bawling voice battling with the music which issued softly from a loud-speaker on a cabinet.

In a chair in the center of the room, William Marsh was sitting, slumped down, his face wan and drawn, his lean hands folded in his lap. That he was a man grief-stricken over the death of his son could not be doubted. That McClane's hammering had worn him still worse was plain to see. Marsh's eyes rose pleadingly to Oakley as McClane straightened.

"Having another brain storm, I see, McClane," Oakley said wrily.

"Listen!" McClane bellowed it. "Twice this station has gone off the air a few minutes, and each time a guy died. The switches that control the power are up here, in the farther room that Marsh uses as a research laboratory. He was the only one near the switches at the time. Does that spell anything to you or not?"

"You're sure that the station's going off the air has something to do with the deaths, McClane?"

"Something's got something to do with the murders, and what other lead is there to follow up? I tell you, there's only one switch that controls the power going to the antenna from the amplifier. It's in the next room, and Marsh was alone in there both times when it happened."

"But the fact remains that you're a bit batty, McClane, if you believe that Marsh deliberately killed his only son."

Marsh moaned: "No—no. I—I loved Richard. He was more to me than any-

thing else in the world. I loved Richard."

McClane growled. As Oakley started for the connecting doors, McClane opened the way. The next room was a clutter of apparatus. Panels glittered in the light, benches were a maze of coils and amplifiers, and numerous radio tubes of all sizes and shapes were in evidence. None of the apparatus seemed to be in use. McClane escorted Oakley through to the adjoining room.

At one end of it two gigantic amplifying tubes were glowing, with water flowing steadily through their cooling jackets. Others were functioning also, building up the powerful potential that the station antenna sprayed into the air pulsing with music and voices. Even larger switchboards were installed here.

A broad bench along one wall was also covered with strange apparatus. In the center of the room, on a tripod pedestal, glistening in the light, was a tremendous cone-shaped coil of heavy, bare copper wire spiralling in the tracks of an insulated shell, shaped like a floodlight reflector. Another tapering coil backed it. This, Oakley presumed, was a piece of apparatus which Marsh had built in his research.

"You see," McClane pointed out, gesturing toward a huge black handle on a panel, "this switch controls the amplified power going to the antenna. Marsh was alone in here both times when the station went dead. Now, I ask you, if there isn't some connection—"

"McClane, be yourself," Oakley chided. "That man's grief is real. He's stricken with sorrow over the death of his son. You're going too far when you suspect him of deliberately killing that boy. When you stop and think it over, doesn't it really seem so?"

McClane grunted. "I can't overlook any chances. But if you think I'm being too hard on the old guy, all right."

Oakley smiled, and returned to the master control room. Placing a sympathetic hand on William Marsh's shoulder, he said: "Don't mind McClane. You'd better go home and get some rest."

Marsh came unsteadily to his feet. "No—no, I can't rest. I must work, to keep my mind off—what happened. I must work because I have only a few days left—only a few days."

THE worn old man ambled slowly through the center room, and into the laboratory beyond. He closed the door, and a latch slid in place as McClane chewed worriedly on his cigar. Oakley turned and regarded the other technicians in the room.

"I suppose you've grilled them, too?"

"Sure—why not?" The two men glanced warily at McClane as he growled. "I'm going to find out who shut the station off the air if I have to third-degree every one of these radio nuts. I tell you there's some connection."

Oakley sighed, signaled Brixey away, and trod down the stairs. He found Sartman still pacing back and forth across the studio director's office. Sartman stopped and wrung his hands.

"Again I must remind myself that I'm here to find out what became of Rex Bartell," Oakley said. "What're you doing about the ransom letter?"

"I've made all arrangements, Oakley," Sartman answered. "Because I couldn't go myself, I sent a detective with the money. It's fake money, of course. They're probably going up in the blimp right now, ready to follow the beach road and drop the bundle when they see the light flash. I pray to God we get Bartell back safely!"

"Men ready to grab whoever picks up that money?"

"Yes, yes! But if they carry out their threat and—"

"Don't worry about Bartell. In spite of

the fact that we can't figure out how the kidnapers grabbed him, they're not so bright if they can't think up any better way of having the ransom money passed to them. If things get too hot, they'll let Bartell go. How, by the way, did that second ransom note come? By mail?"

"No—no! It was found out on the door mat, just as you found the first."

"How'd it get there? Nobody could get in through the gate to leave it, or throw it in, without the cop's seeing something. Did he?"

"No. I'm afraid, Oakley, that somebody who comes and goes unquestioned has left those letters there. Somebody here, in this studio—"

"Just tell McClane that," Oakley commented, "and he'll grill the gizzard out of everybody in the place."

McClane lumbered in as Oakley spoke. He was fumbling with a notebook. Oakley asked him for details, and McClane grudgingly gave them.

The body of Sidney Wheaton had been found covered with strange burns, exactly as Marsh's had been. McClane had a list of them—small burns, circles, two rows of them, on both insteps; pin-point burns on the heels; irregular-shaped burns in front of the calves; a square burn on the pit of the stomach; round burns on the thighs, and another at one side of the abdomen; gash-like burns on each wrist, on the underside, and two circular burns on the neck, one in front and one in back.

"They mean plenty, of course," Oakley said. "The hell of this case is that things have been happening so fast that we've had no time to try to figure them out. I'm going to the office for a session of brain-racking. Besides, I have an appointment this evening, and it's almost due."

The inner door opened, and a girl came out. She was the secretary whose burns Archibald Brixey had so sympathetically investigated. She was still pale and shaky, but artificial color on her face, and her smart suit, made her an attractive figure.

She stopped and said: "Perhaps—maybe I could give you an idea."

Oakley regarded her with interest. "Yes. An idea about what?"

"About what happened to Mr. Wheaton."

"For God's sake, let's have it!" McClane blurted.

"Why—why, I saw Mr. Wheaton come into the office. He was mad—awful mad. I never saw anybody so mad in my life. I said to myself, 'He looks—' "

"Well?" McClane demanded.

"I suggest, McClane," said Oakley quietly, "that you're expecting too much."

"Well?" McClane demanded again.

"Well, I said to myself, 'He looks mad enough to burst'—and then he did!"

Oakley moaned. "Good night, McClane," he whispered.

CHAPTER SIX

Invisible Power

WITH Archibald Brixey behind him, Clay Oakley unlocked the door labeled *Secrets, Inc.* Surprised to find lights burning in the reception room, he pushed into the *sanctum sanctorum.* There he discovered Miss Cherry Morris, relaxed in the easy chair, wriggling the toes of her stocking feet.

"I sent you home," Oakley chided her.

"I'm waiting," said Cherry, "for that hamburger sandwich."

Oakley sighed as he settled into a chair. "Look here, young woman. The brain inside that head of yours is as bright as the hair which decorates it. Got any ideas?"

"Cherry is stumped, Oke," said the girl.

"You went into that studio, when Marsh was killed, as soon as I did. It was stifling hot, though the heat was turned off. Any guesses why?"

"Marsh, I've been told, was very hot stuff," said Cherry.

"No cracks! The station went off the air at the time of the murders, but of course your mind is still dwelling on hamburger sandwiches. Cherry, I'd like nothing better than to go over to the Twin Barrels with you, but I've got an appointment."

"Important?" asked Cherry.

"More important than hamburgers, sweetheart."

Oakley trod into the adjoining room, which housed his voluminous files, and came back bearing several thick folders. Settling at his desk, he removed papers and newspaper clippings from them, and studied them. Archibald Brixey settled in another chair and yawned. Cherry kept wriggling her alluring toes. Oakley concentrated until, at last, he sat back with a sigh.

"Nothing anywhere," he said.

A knock sounded on the door. Cherry slipped into her slippers, entered the reception room, and opened the way. A tall man, carrying a briefcase, was outside. He asked to see Mr. Oakley, and Cherry brought him into the inner sanctum.

"Mr. Cartwright?" Oakley asked. He introduced the gentleman to his assistants. "Mr. Cartwright is a consulting radio engineer." As he gestured the man to a chair he inquired: "What have you found?"

"Very interesting data."

Cartwright brought papers out of his briefcase, and among them a magazine. He passed them to Oakley, and Oakley studied them. Presently the private investigator turned bright eyes on his assistants.

"Have you," he asked, "ever heard of a bevy of gentlemen named McLennan, Bunton, Gosset, Cutwhilst, Lakhowsky and Schereschewsky? I thought not. I have here, thanks to Mr. Cartwright," Oakley explained, "a copy of *The Canadian Journal of Research,* Volume Three. Turning to Page Two hundred and twenty-four I find an article called *The Heating of Electrolytes in High Frequency Fields.* It is written by J. C. McLennan, F. R. S., and A. C. Bunton, M. A."

Archibald Brixey was leaning forward. "It sounds very imposing."

"And interesting. I'll read you the first paragraph of this paper.

" 'Considerable interest has been aroused by the discovery that curious and unexpected physiological and biological effects are produced by short electromatic waves of wave-lengths fifty meters and under. Gosset, Cutwhilst, Lakhowsky and Magram, in 1924, reported an effect on plant tumors, while Schereschewsky in 1926 noted their lethal affects on mice and inferred that certain wave-lengths have a specific effect on living cells. The production of fever in men has been observed. Later experiments show that the phenomenon observed so far can be explained as due to simple heating effects."

"Which means what?" Cherry Morris asked, perking up.

"Mr. Cartwright will be able to explain it better than I. Let's have it, Cartwright."

The radio engineer sat forward in his chair. "Experiments concerning the effects of short-waves on living tissues have been going on for some time," he began. "In the General Electric plant at Schenectady there are a number of such contrivances. They have been put to therapeutic use. That is, human bodies, subjected to very short radio wave-lengths, generate artificial fevers, and this is one way of combating disease."

"We're more interested in how people are killed than how they are cured," Oakley remarked.

"Quite. I want you to know first that the use of short-wave-lengths in this man-

ner has been going on for some time. There are electrical furnaces, too, which make use of the eddy-currents generated in the fields of high-frequency coils. These eddy-currents, passing through conductors, generate heat. They are used for the final elimination of residual gasses in the manufacture of radio vacuum tubes, but I won't go into that."

"Don't," said Archie Brixey. "Get to the point."

"Yes. We know, then, that powerful short-waves generate heat when they are absorbed by conductors. The better the conductor, the more absorption of the radiating short radio waves, and the more heat developed. So copper, iron, all metals, when in this high-frequency field, become hot."

"A copper fulminate cap—"

"Would become heated."

"Even inside a human body?"

CARTWRIGHT was emphatic in his reply. "Of course," he said. "The short radio waves penetrate all substances, exactly as ordinary radio waves of the broadcast band do. At this moment, your body is being shot through and through with radio waves, and this has always been true, especially since commercial broadcasting began. It's harmless, of course—except that very powerful short-waves generate heat."

"Then, if these waves were powerful enough, and were made to pass through the body of a person in which was contained a copper fulminate cap—"

"The cap would explode."

"But—"

"The very short wave-lengths," Cartwright continued, "are directional in the same sense as light. They can be shot along a certain path, like the beam of a searchlight, although, of course, they are invisible. It's possible, Mr. Oakley, that this was done in the case of the two murders. A beam of powerful short radio waves was half the instrument of murder. The fulminate caps in the stomachs of the victims was the other half."

"I say!" blurted Brixey.

"The source of these short waves could have been anywhere close at hand—possibly in another building?"

"Yes—but the likelihood is that the source was in the same building. The most probable place is the control rooms upstairs in KSPS. I know the layout well; I've even seen some of the apparatus William Marsh built. If a beam of short radio waves was shot downward from a parabolic repulsor, the beam, like invisible light, would penetrate the ceiling, and the full power would strike upon the young men below and—"

"I've heard enough!" Oakley exclaimed. "Thanks, Cartwright!" He jerked up, gesturing. "Cherry, write the gentleman a check." As Cartwright withdrew, he paced the floor. Pausing in the corner, he clicked the switch of a radio and turned the dial to the position of KSPS. As music floated into the room, and the outer door closed, Oakley turned to face Brixey.

"That's it, Archie! Somebody upstairs in KSPS did exactly that—paved the way for murder by getting Marsh and Wheaton to swallow fulminate caps without knowing it—then bumped them off by drilling them with a focused beam of short-waves, intensely powerful. God, what a way to kill a man!"

"Devilish!" Brixey exclaimed. "The murderer was nowhere in the room, but upstairs, out of sight. I say, Oke. Who could have done it? You can't suspect Marsh, who probably rigged up the apparatus, of deliberately killing his only son. It's obvious he's all broken up by it. Then who—"

"Somebody else in the place—somebody who understood the apparatus that Marsh

built. The damnedest, most devilish—"

Oakley broke off as a voice issued from the loud-speaker of the radio. "This is Station KSPS, Stupendous Productions broadcasting, ladies and gentlemen. We have just completed the last broadcast of the evening—"

"The station's shutting down!" Oakley exclaimed. "Archie—come along!"

He started for the door and stopped short, facing Cherry Morris. She was powdering her nose and adjusting wisps of bright red hair.

"Cherry's coming too, Oke."

"You're going home to bed!" Oakley snapped. "This damn thing is too dangerous, Cherry. We're probably dealing with a madman. I certainly don't want you burned to a crisp, darling, if it should come to that."

"Cherry," said Cherry, more firmly, "is going along!"

"Nix! Come on, Archie!"

Oakley sped out the door, with Archie leaping at his heels. He ignored the call from Cherry Morris that echoed after him. Quickly dodging through late traffic, into the parking space beside Grauman's Chinese, he ducked into his roadster. The next moment the car was whizzing along a cross street toward Santa Monica Boulevard and the Stupendous studios.

"But Oke!" Brixey gasped as he clung to his hat, "what has this to do with Bartell's disappearance?"

"Not a damned thing that I know of, Archie," Oakley answered, as the tires whined around a corner. "But it explains a hell of a lot else. How the fulminate caps were exploded. Why the burns on the corpses. See that? The burns on the feet were caused by the eyelets and nails in the shoes getting red hot, instantly. The burns on the legs, from the metal in the garters. The burns on the thighs from coins in the pockets. The burns on the abdomen from the belt-buckle, and possibly a watch. The burns on the front and back of the neck due to collar buttons. Tremendously powerful short-waves were shooting into those rooms for a moment.

"That's why the rooms were so hot! That's why the secretary's typewriter sizzled—some of the waves reached it, and she wasn't burned otherwise because she was wearing nothing metal, except the clasps of her garters. And the studio going off the air—

"Somebody switched the entire power of the station into the short-wave apparatus—thousands of watts! Oakley exclaimed. "That's the answer, Archie—that's how those boys were killed. But who did it? *Who?*"

The wind tore past them as they sped.

OAKLEY and Brixey pushed through the gate and door of the broadcasting building. The reception room was deserted. Oakley ran up the stairs to the second floor, with Brixey at his heels. A quick look through the glass doors of the studios disclosed them all empty.

Up the next flight went Oakley. He stepped into the master control room to find it deserted. The bulbs on the panels were no longer glowing. He pushed into the center room, then into the far room which served as the research laboratory. It, like the others, was empty.

Oakley regarded the towering piece of apparatus which sat on a castered tripod, its helixical wires glittering in the light. It looked strange and ominous. He stepped past, glanced at the huge switchboard, and saw that the power was off. With a sigh he turned back.

"Is that the thing that was used, Oke?" Archie inquired.

"Probably, though God knows who used it. What's directly below here? The studio in which Marsh died! And just

ahead, on the front corner, Claxton's office! Both could be reached easily by direct beams. We'll check up on that, Archie!"

Oakley passed through the control rooms, and down the stairs. When he reached the base of the flight, the door of Claxton's office opened, and Max Sartman stepped out. He gestured nervously as he strode toward Oakley.

"I've been trying to get you on the phone. The men who took the money along the shore road in the blimp have just reported. Nothing happened—no lights!"

"What?" Oakley exclaimed. "Nobody signaled for the money to be dropped?"

"Nobody! They're onto us, Oakley! They know a trap was set for them. We'll never see Rex Bartell alive again—never!"

"I'll be damned." Oakley's eyes glittered. "We've got to forget Bartell for a minute, and hope that he's safe. Sartman, upstairs is a machine that was used for killing your two juveniles. They were murdered by—"

Oakley pushed into the studio in which Marsh had died as he spoke. Sartman followed, listening intently. Oakley strode to the table, studying its position.

"The research laboratory is diagonally above. Nothing between this table and that machine but a floor and a wall, and the short waves penetrate those as though they did not exist. Claxton's office—just a swing of that parabolic repulsor, a throw of the switch—and it was done!"

Sartman was mystified and silent. Quickly Oakley covered the theory behind the weapon of murder. He pointed out that it explained every strange aspect of the victim's body, and even the length of microphone cord which was only partially burned because only part of it lay within the beam of invisible power. Sartman listened aghast, as Oakley paced back and forth and talked.

"The man we want was in the research laboratory, upstairs, alone, at the instant death hit those juveniles. He used the machine Marsh built, throwing the entire power of the station into it. It was all over in a few seconds."

"But the capsules—"

"Somebody hid the caps in the capsules as the first step in the murder. The next was to get the victims within the bounds of the short-wave beam so that the power would be sufficient to explode the caps in their stomachs. Insane as it sounds, it was a damned clever weapon of murder to choose—because the murderer needn't be present, and the effects were so puzzling—"

Sartman, pacing while he listened, paused beside the window of the monitor booth in the corner. His jaw sagged as he gazed at a panel inside.

"Who could have done it, Sartman? Who could have been within reach of that piece of apparatus upstairs, other than William Marsh? I say 'other than William Marsh' because it's impossible to believe that man deliberately murdered his own son. One of the technicians—somebody who—"

"Look!" Sartman blurted.

Oakley stepped close beside him. He saw, inside the monitor booth, only a dim red glow on the panel. A tiny signal bulb was burning.

"The mike in this studio is alive!" Sartman exclaimed. "Somebody's turned on the juice. Somebody's listening in—they've heard everything you said!"

"What? Where? Upstairs? I was just up there—the place is empty."

"No, no!" Sartman exclaimed. "Someone is up there now. The power is on. I tell you, somebody's listening in—somebody's heard every word you said!"

Oakley's eyes narrowed as his hand

slipped beneath his coat toward his armpit holster. "Glad to hear it," he remarked tartly. "We're going up!"

OAKLEY swung out of the studio and bounded up the stairs. At the head of the flight he paused, peering up and down the narrow hallway which ran the entire length of the building. Archie Brixey paused beside him, and Sartman followed, wheezing.

There was no sound. Oakley stepped into the master control room. Now he saw that a single vacuum valve on a panel was glowing; one, obviously, which connected with the microphone in the death studio. But there was no one in the room; and the door leading into the next was wide open.

Oakley's gun slipped out as he stepped to the sill. A swift shift of his head, and he saw that no one was hiding behind the wall or the open door. The grotesque radio apparatus glistened in the light. Quietly he crossed to the farther door, which connected with the research lab.

He twisted the knob and pushed. The door was firm. Stepping back, he eyed it.

"Who's in there?" he called.

There was no answer. Oakley turned, and signaled Archie Brixey. "Ease around to the hallway door which connects with that room, Archie. If it's open, go in, and go ready to shoot."

Brixey's aristocratic features hardened as he slipped his own automatic out, and strode quietly back into the master control room. Oakley watched him pass through the door into the hallway, and heard his footfalls on the carpet. A moment of quiet passed before the footfalls came again. Brixey walked quickly into the middle room.

"Locked," he said.

Oakley's eyes sought Sartman's. "It may please you to know," he said quietly, "that the murderer is in that room. He slipped in there while we were talking downstairs." He knows he's trapped and —anything may happen."

Sartman asked in a breathy whisper: "Who?"

Oakley smiled tartly. "It's got to be someone who knows the studio thoroughly, somebody who can use Marsh's apparatus. One possibility occurs to me —the only possibility."

Again Sartman whispered: "Who?"

"Arthur Claxton."

Sartman merely stared. Oakley took a moment to slip from the room, into the hallway, and try the other door which connected with the research lab. It was still locked; and there was still an ominous silence behind the panels. He retraced his steps to find Sartman coming into the hall.

"Stay out here," Oakley told the supervisor quickly, "and guard that door. If anybody tries to get out—"

"You think Claxton did it? You think he's the one who's in that room?"

"I think—"

Oakley broke off, peering down the stairwell. Red suffused his face. A man was running up the flight from the second floor. He was looking up, and his face was clearly visible in the bright light.

The man was Arthur Claxton.

"—not!" finished Oakley with a snap.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Skeleton Without Arms

CLAXTON paused at the top step. Oakley regarded him angrily, Sartman in amazement. Claxton demanded: "What the hell's the matter? Can't I come into my own studio without being stared at like a ghost? Or are you going to get nasty again, Oakley?"

"I feel," said Oakley, "very nasty. I'd just decided you were a murderer, Claxton, and your appearance shows me I'm

wrong. Unless you just dropped out of the window of that research lab, leaving it locked, and came in here to try to fool—"

"I've been dropping out of no windows, Oakley," Claxton answered frigidly. "I came here to catch up on lost time in my work, since you've insisted that Miss Westmore stay in town and we can't leave. She's downstairs, in my office now. The cop at the gate will tell you—"

"Never mind," Oakley sighed. He gestured to Sartman again. "Stay out here in the hall and keep an eye on that door. Whoever's in there, I'm going to get him out if I have to tear down a wall." And he turned, tramping angrily back into the master control room.

Claxton followed him. Brixey was at the locked door of the middle room. Oakley was about to speak when a sound came through the panel—a faint creaking. Brixey jerked and Oakley's eyes widened.

"Still in there!" he exclaimed.

He turned quickly at a new sound behind him—quick, light footfalls. They came across the hallway, and into the master control room, and Miss Cherry Morris came with them. She paused, smiling, puckering her patrician nose.

"I will not," she declared, "be left behind!"

Oakley moaned. "Cherry, get out of here!" he ordered her. "The man we want is in that room. He's trapped. If he starts shooting, I don't want any bullets burying themselves in your beautiful young body. Beat it!"

"Now that I'm here," Cherry said firmly, "I'm going to stay. Just let your murderer start shooting, and I'll flash a knee at him and disrupt his aim."

Oakley gave it up. Grimly he whirled back to the door. He twisted the knob again, and pounded knuckles on the panel. "Open up!" he commanded. "Come out of there, or we'll break in and get you!"

The only answer that came from the sealed room was another soft creak. Oakley drew back. Gesturing, he directed Brixey. "Let's have that chair. That door's going down."

Brixey shifted it toward him. Oakley gripped its back, swung it up. It was poised above his head when his muscles suddenly tightened. For one instant he kept the position, while strange expressions crossed the faces of the others in the room.

Swiftly Oakley dropped the chair. He snatched at his vest pocket. From it he jerked the small box labeled *Madame Midnight*. With the same movement, as a gasp escaped him, he twirled it across the room, into a corner.

Instantly an explosion rang. The pasteboard box flew into fluttering fragments. Fumes puffed into the air. The report rang sharply from the walls. In the corner, where the box had fallen, there were now only a few flakes of paper and a floating fog.

"He's turned on the machine!"

Oakley blurted it as he peered at the others in the room. He was feeling suddenly hot, as though a fever had seized his body and was mounting by the second. He half shouted: "Get any metal off of you! Free yourself of metal or you'll be burned!"

Crazily he began fumbling through his pockets. Oakley's warning gained significance immediately in the minds of the others. The girl gasped and tore at a tiny necklace dangling about her neck. She flung it away, and a red mark was left on her skin.

It was a weird, half-comical moment that passed within the room. Money scattered as Oakley, Brixey and Claxton turned pockets inside out. Two watches thumped to the floor. Cherry Morris slipped a ring from her finger and then, with celerity, snatched up her skirts and

tugged herself free of a pair of garters while displaying enchanting legs.

As Claxton's cigarette case fell to the floor, a wisp of smoke curled from inside it. Oakley's belt and Brixey's suspenders followed it. Quickly they kicked off their shoes, ripped off collars, tore out buttons. In a moment they were freed of all things metal.

During that ludicrous moment, they had worked their way from the middle room into the master control room; but the growing heat followed them. The air was stifling. Oakley felt his body burning with terrific fever. The wall they placed between themselves and the door of the research lab did not diminish the power of the invisible beam in the slightest.

"Cherry, get out!" Oakley shouted. "Claxton, go with her. Archie and I are tackling that door!"

Cherry Morris pattered in slipperless feet into the hallway, her stockings slipping down. Claxton backed out, his face beaded with sweat. Oakley glanced around swiftly.

Everything metallic in the room seemed to be radiating heat, sizzling. A coil of wire that lay on a desk was giving off fumes as its insulation melted. Oakley had slammed the door shut during the retreat; as he moved to twist the knob, to jerk the door open again, the intense radiation from it stopped his hand.

Brixey was gasping for air. Oakley tore off his coat, covered his hand with it, and grabbed the knob. As the door swung open, smoke puffed up from the fabric, and he dropped it. He hurried into the inner room, sweat pouring down his face, as Brixey gasped in after him.

The center room was filled with scorched fumes. The apparatus on the table was crackling with the increasing heat. Oakley could feel it penetrating his body, a heat that crowded around his heart and upset the working of his lungs. The organs within him seemed to be blistering, his blood coming to a boil.

With growing intensity, the invisible power was beating through the door of the research lab.

"Oke! Oke!" It was the frantic call from Cherry Morris. "Come away! Please come away!"

Oakley gasped an unintelligible answer as he snatched up the chair. He swung it swiftly against the panels of the connecting door. A leg snapped off, but the panel held. Oakley swung again, feeling that the terrific, penetrating heat was sapping all strength from his body.

Brixey, panting, dragged another chair from the master control room. He straddled beside Oakley, and whacked it against the door. Alternately they crashed the chairs against the panels. The wood of the door cracked; a slat of it fell out. A bright light shafted through as Oakley dropped his chair and stumbled forward.

In the research lab he could see the gigantic, tripoded piece of apparatus, turned toward him. The heat was beating out of it. He hung to the door, gasping, as he reached through the crack toward the latch. And as he fumbled, his watering eyes stared—stared at the man inside.

That man was standing calmly, looking through the broken door. He was making no attempt to attack Oakley and Brixey. He was holding something in one hand, and the other was moving toward his mouth. The regular, even gesture was absurdly like that of a person eating nuts. And, seeing him, Oakley's eyes widened in amazement.

Oakley found the blistering hot catch and drew it back. He kicked the connecting door open with one savage thrust. He was lurching across the sill, when the man in the lab moved. That man's hand raised a last time to his mouth as he

stepped forward, to a position directly in front of the powerful, radiating apparatus.

"Back!" Oakley gasped. "Back, Archie!"

He stumbled out the door, pulling Brixey with him. Keeping his feet, he stared in mute horror. For a second now the man in the lab had been standing directly in the beam of invisible power. And suddenly—

A muffled, horrible explosion sounded. The man in the next room disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Liquid spattered through the air as the thump of the falling body sounded. Looking down, Oakley saw spots on his hands—spots of red—blood. Through the doorway fumes gushed, awful and nauseating.

Through the mist of fog, Oakley stared. Brixey was hanging to him, gasping. On the floor now was a widening pool of red.

Oakley gasped: "He killed himself!"

Thrusting forward, he stumbled through the connecting door, beyond the horror on the floor. As he passed outside of the beam of invisible power, the terrific heat abruptly disappeared. With his body bathed in perspiration, his skin still smarting, but breathing more freely, Oakley moved toward the switches on the big board which were thrown on.

He snatched the handles down. A crackling sound came from the tripoded apparatus. Assured that the power was off, Oakley turned back.

Brixey was grimacing as he peered at the thing on the floor.

It had been the body of a man. Now it was ripped asunder, a thing of horror. Bathed in blood, with fumes oozing up from it, it lay weltering. The head, disfigured beyond recognition, had been blown off. The upper part of the body had been denuded of flesh by the terrific power of the internal explosion, and the broken ribs lay white and bare. The arms had fallen aside, with the upper parts also stripped clean. In an instant a man had been turned into a skeleton—without arms.

"God!" Brixey gasped. "I didn't even see his face before it happened."

"I saw his face," Oakley answered tightly. "It was William Marsh."

"Marsh! Marsh, after all?"

"Marsh, after all," said Oakley.

A new sound startled him. It was a crash of breaking glass, and it came from the middle room. Oakley stepped over the sill, and saw the glittering fragments on the floor. They had flown from one of the windows—and outside that window now, a window three stories above the ground, there was movement.

A man was dangling in space. A rope was whipped about him, and he was clinging to it. He was swinging, twisting; one of his feet, out-thrown, had struck the window and broken the pane.

Oakley sprang to the latch, and slid up the sash. As he reached out and closed arms around the dangling body, he heard a startled gasp. Ungently, Oakley dragged the dangling man in through the window. He forced the hands to let go of the rope. There was a scramble—and a young man sprawled on the floor.

He dragged himself up, panting.

"My word!" exclaimed Archibald Brixey.

"I'll be damned!" blurted Oakley.

It was the young man whose mysterious disappearance had first brought Clay Oakley to the Stupendous broadcasting station—Rex Bartell!

OKE OAKLEY grabbed Rex Bartell's arm. "Cherry!" he called. The young man breathed hard and looked frightened as the red-headed girl hurried, still slipperless, into the room. "Take him to Claxton's office and keep him there till I come down!"

"Listen!" Bartell begged. His was a brunette handsomeness well adapted to

the screen, though now his clothes were wrinkled and dirtied. "I can explain—"

"You bet your life you can, and you'll do it in a minute," Oakley told him grimly. "Cherry, lure him away."

Oakley stepped to the door of the research lab and closed it, giving one last, grimacing look at the thing, half man, half armless skeleton, which lay inside. He picked up shoes, money, anything he could find and, padding in his stocking feet into the master control room, sank into a chair, and breathed in cool air.

Brixey was looking blank. "Oke," he said, "I'm all in a muddle."

"Stay in it a while!" Oakley snapped, drawing on a shoe. "We'll have the answer in a minute."

He refused to say more, though Max Sartman lumbered in, gesticulating, half crying, half sobbing. The supervisor trotted behind Oakley down the stairs. Oakley stepped into Claxton's office on the second floor to find Rex Bartell and Alice Westmore wrapped in each other's arms.

"This," Cherry Morris remarked, "is some clinch. It's been going on for minutes."

Oakley snorted. He tapped Bartell's shoulder, and the young man drew away from the girl. Immediately he began to blurt: "I know it was a crazy idea, but—I did it because—well, I was fading out and I thought if I got lots of publicity the studio would—"

"You did *what* because?" Oakley demanded.

"Kidnaped myself."

"Kidnaped *yourself?*"

"Why, sure." Bartell's was the naiveté of youth. "You didn't think somebody really grabbed me, did you?"

"To tell the truth," Oakley said grimly, "we did think that. And now you pop up here and tell me you kidnaped yourself!"

Alice Westmore exclaimed: "It was a wild, impulsive thing to do, Mr. Oakley—but I can understand why Rex did it. I was just as desperate to get ahead in pictures when I began. Once he started it, of course, he had to go on with it and—"

"Suppose," said Oakley with a sigh, "you begin from the beginning, young man."

"Sure." Bartell grinned impulsively. "You see, I wasn't doing so well. I'd had a few small parts, but nothing new was coming along. In fact, Mr. Sartman told me only a week ago that he wasn't going to take up my option. Well, I got desperate—because I had to keep my job—I had to make big money so I could marry Alice—and I just planned it out."

"To kidnap yourself," Oakley said sourly.

"Sure. My idea was to get a lot of swell publicity. The newspapers would play it up big. My name would be all over the front pages. Then, afterward, I'd have such a big publicity value that I'd stay in pictures. People would be sure to come and see Rex Bartell in any picture, after all that. So I—"

"You got the publicity, all right—millions of dollars worth of it," Oakley said. "If you don't get thrown into the jug on top of it."

Bartell paled; but he went on. "I was to broadcast that night, you see—studio talk, you know—and I had it all planned out. I left my car in back of the studio, with grips in it. There were blankets in the grips, and cans of food, and water, and enough to keep me comfortable for days while I was on the roof—"

"On the roof!" Oakley moaned. "You mean to tell me that all the while we were looking for you, you were on the roof of this very building?"

"Sure. It's the highest on the lot, and there wasn't any danger of anybody's seeing me. So I parked the car, with the grips in it. I had a rope tied to the handles

of the grips, and I threw the rope up on the roof. After three tries, it stayed up there. So then I went into the studio, and when I saw my chance I climbed out the window, and up on the awning—"

"And onto the roof—yes," Oakley added.

"It wasn't hard. I'd done harder stunts than that before the camera. Once I was on the roof, I pulled the suitcases up. Then I just planned to stay there until I reappeared—until it would look like the kidnapers released me. Those ransom letters—why, I just dropped them off the roof so they fell near the front door. I just stayed up there and ate and slept and—"

"Drove people crazy. Nice idea!" Oakley commented.

Alice Westmore spoke earnestly to Oakley. "He didn't tell me about it first, Mr. Oakley, or I wouldn't have let him do it. The first I knew was when I got a letter from Rex, telling me what he was about to do, and by then he'd already done it. He told me where he was. Because I wanted to go to him, to tell him he couldn't go on with it, I came to the studio dressed as a man."

"Because you were known as Bartell's fiancée?"

"Yes. I told Arthur about it, and he'd gotten me the pass, in a false name. I called to Rex, and he let down the rope. He hoisted me up there with him. I was scared to death, but I was so worried about what Rex was doing I—I tried to induce him to give it up, but it was too late then. When you saw me, I'd just been let down again by the rope and—"

"And," Oakley supplied, "you led me a merry chase! All right. One publicity-crazy young actor accounts for one hell of a mess. But it doesn't explain why Marsh deliberately killed his son—"

"Deliberately?" Arthur Claxton said. "Certainly not, Oakley! Marsh couldn't have known that his own son was broadcasting from that room."

"What!"

"Not at all. It was Sidney Wheaton who was scheduled to speak on that program in the first place. He didn't show up in time. We had his script here and when I saw Richard Marsh in the place, I induced Marsh to take Wheaton's place on the program."

"Oh, God!" Oakley moaned. "Marsh was in the spot that Wheaton should have been in?"

"Certainly. Marsh was an expert mimic, and I'd often heard him take off Wheaton's theatrical accent. I introduced Marsh as Wheaton, and Marsh read Wheaton's speech as Wheaton would have done it. Anyone listening in wouldn't have known the difference."

Oakley was staring. "Good Lord! William Marsh was listening in, upstairs. He heard Wheaton announced and thought Wheaton was speaking. He turned that machine on, and Marsh died instead of Wheaton. No wonder Marsh was broken up—realizing he'd killed his own son by mistake!"

"You see, Oakley," Sartman spoke up, "Wheaton was entirely innocent in the matter of the explosive in those capsules. He didn't know the stuff was in there, certainly. He'd already taken some of them. The caps must've been lodged in his stomach, so that when the short-wave power hit him later—he died the same way Marsh died."

"Then William Marsh put the caps in Wheaton's capsules. They were intended for Wheaton only!"

"Say, I saw"—it was Rex Bartell again— "I saw Marsh's father in the dressing room several days ago. He was alone in there when I went in. I thought I saw him closing the drawer of Wheaton's dressing table. He pretended he was doing nothing out of the way—but he

was upset and nervous. I didn't think much of it at the time—"

"William Marsh," broke in Alice Westmore quietly, "came to my studio almost a week ago, and asked for some of the same herb capsules that I had given Sidney Wheaton. Obviously he loaded them with caps and switched the loaded ones for the ones in Wheaton's dressing-table. But why? Why was William Marsh going to kill Wheaton?"

"For the same reason," Rex Bartell said, "that I was crazy enough to fake my own kidnaping. Because Sidney Wheaton was the pet of this studio. He was getting all the best juvenile parts, and Dick and I were being given the air. Dick Marsh's option wasn't going to be taken up, either. Dick's father—

"The man was mad about Dick—his only son. I've been to their place several times, and the mere mention of Wheaton's name was enough to make William Marsh rave. Wheaton was getting all the breaks, and Dick was suffering for it. Wheaton was being built into a star, and Dick was getting thrown out of work. William Marsh hated Wheaton. Because he was so crazy about Dick, and wanted Dick to reach the top—that's why.

"Another thing—William Marsh was through here at the studio, in his research work. He was broke because the studio appropriation wasn't enough to pay all the costs of his work, and he used all his salary for the expenses. And when he saw that Sidney Wheaton was costing Dick his job, too—that both of them would be left without work and without money—he killed Wheaton. To eliminate the competition, of course, so Dick would stay with the studio, and get the big parts. It was more important than life or death to William Marsh—I know."

Oakley sighed and rose. "Damned sad," he said. "Ironic that circumstances brought it about so that Marsh killed his own son instead of the man he planned to kill. It must have broken his mind. His killing Wheaton afterward must have been a crazy gesture of revenge."

Oakley paused, and eyed Cherry Morris. She had replaced her slippers and garters and was rouging her lips.

"I suggest, Sartman," said Oakley wearily, "that you think up a good string of lies to make McClane believe that Bartell was actually kidnaped, and that the kidnapers released him. You don't want that kid in trouble. You want him in pictures, don't you?"

"Yes—yes! All the publicity he got! A fool trick, but—what publicity!"

"And what would Hollywood be without publicity?" Oakley asked. "Come, Cherry. Come, Archie."

Wearily Oakley walked out the studio door, and through the gate, with Brixey on one side, and Cherry's arm on his.

"Now," asked Cherry, "what?"

"We shall go," smiled Oakley, "and get us a hamburger sandwich."

IN THE FEBRUARY 15th ISSUE

THE CLOCK-TOWER MURDERS

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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for February 15th Out February 1st

Shoes For The Dead

A Horatio Humberton Novelette

By

J. Paul Suter

Author of "Seconds of Doom," etc.



The dreadful thing came on.

The natives called it "Wendigo" —that undead murder monster who stalked from Devil's Wood by night, leaving murder in its wake. Humberton thought he knew better. He'd embalmed some thousand corpses in his day and never seen a coffined man return to life. But even he was wrong for the dead do rise!

CHAPTER ONE

Devil's Wood

JOYCE, the red-headed lumber salesman, lit one of Humberton's cigars and added an interesting statement to his story. "They find the poor devils bloody at the nose, and with their feet burned to a crisp."

"Dead?" asked Clyde.

"Oh, certainly. The trip through the air does that—the terrific speed, you know. That's the cause of the bleeding and burning, too—speed—speed that forces the blood out through their eyes,

and sucks their breath away, and kills 'em."

"The 'Wendigo!'" repeated Horatio Humberton, thoughtfully. "I've heard of that Indian superstition, of course. I'm glad to meet someone who really knows about it."

The three of them were in a smoker, somewhere in Minnesota. Horatio Humberton, funeral director and student of crime, and his ally of the detective force, Jim Clyde, were on the train because their mutual friend, Lynn Bascom, had invited them to spend a vacation in the north woods. Bascom had been a criminal lawyer. He was now retired, and living at his boyhood home in Otter Falls, near the Canadian boundary. Clyde and Humberton listened with the interest of visitors to the Northwest while Joyce gave them still more details about the Wendigo.

"It's big—bigger than a man," he said. "Generally, you don't hear much about its appearance, except for the burning feet and bloody eyes. They're picturesque—make a great yarn. After it takes a fellow for a hundred-mile-an-hour trip through the air over the tree-tops, he has the same foot and eye trouble. That's the end of him—except in Otter Falls."

He paused with a grin, and Clyde asked the question he was expected to ask. "Why not in Otter Falls?"

"Well, they're different up at the Falls. They have their own Wendigo legend. Up there, he doesn't take his victims for a ride. He tears their hearts out, instead. They have their own notions at the Falls. It's their situation, I guess. The Falls is the first place south of Devil's Wood. Ever hear of it?"

Clyde shook his head, but Humberton nodded.

"A stretch of very wild country, isn't it?"

"Wild? There isn't any wilder on the North American Continent. It begins in the United States—there at the Falls—and stretches up into Canada."

"Clyde and I may do a little exploring there before we return to Cleveland," Humberton remarked, thoughtfully.

Their acquaintance of the train smiled and winked at Clyde—just why, the big detective had no idea.

"I planned to do that once," he returned. "Even got up a little way into the place—maybe a mile or so. I came back—darned glad to get back. None of the natives would go with me. After I went in I knew why. I won't tell you fellows about it. Find out for yourselves."

CLYDE made several attempts at cross-examination, but in vain. That seemed one thing their talkative friend would not tell. Or perhaps he was an experienced yarn-spinner, who knew when to be silent. They bade him good-by when they left the train, and he still had not explained.

"How far did Bascom say it was to his place?" the detective inquired, as they alighted at the small station in the woods.

"Two hours' ride. He'll either come for us or send someone."

"That means we eat about six thirty. Well, Ho, I'll say this for the place. Their town and their station ain't much, but they've got woods. Yes, sir, they've certainly got woods! I'm going to like this country—and I'm going to have a lumberjack's appetite when we pull up to Bascom's table."

A man strolled around the corner of the station building. Though the Minnesota summer air seemed sharp to the two Clevelanders, his shirt was open nearly to the belt, disclosing an enormous, hairy chest. His face was hairy, too—rugged and blond-bearded, with mild blue eyes peering from under heavy brows.

He walked directly to them. "Bascom couldn't come," he said. "Trouble up at the Falls. I've got a Ford over here. I'm

Bench—Steve Bench. Let's get along."

When they and their luggage were in the dilapidated Ford, being driven with reckless speed by the blue-eyed man over a narrow dirt road which twisted between towering trees, Humberton realized suddenly that both he and Clyde had asked a number of questions and had been answered only with grunts. Perhaps the jolting speed of their journey explained this. He leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

"What is this trouble you mentioned at the Falls?"

Steve Bench glanced back at him. "Bascom'll tell you," he said.

Humberton remembered the conversation in the train. "Has it anything to do with the Wendigo?" he inquired.

That got results. Bench stepped on his brakes—so forcibly that his two passengers were thrown against the back of the front seat. He reached a huge, muscular hand to the ignition switch, turned it off, and swung his big body around to face them.

"What do you know about the Wendigo?" he demanded.

"We heard about it on the train," Humberton explained.

The driver nodded his blond head. "Lots do. Lots believe in it. Bascom blames what has took place on the Wendigo. Anyway, he says he does. Ever see Bascom?"

"He's an old friend of ours," said Clyde.

"How long since you seen him?"

"Five or six years—ain't it, Ho?"

"Well"—Bench ignored Humberton's confirmation—"it ain't rightly my business. I do odd jobs for Bascom—like bringing you up from the train. He's no friend of mine and I ain't no friend of his—and no enemy, neither. But you're strangers, so I'm warning you. I guess maybe he was all right when you knowed him, and when he felt his trouble coming on he quit and hustled up to this country. This was where his father lived before him. He had the same trouble. I'll tell you this much—what's happening at the Falls ain't done by no Wendigo. It's Bascom himself!"

"What *is* happening?" Humberton tried to ask the question casually. Here was a man to be humored. But Steve Bench shook his head, stubbornly.

" 'Taint no place of mine to tell you more'n I have. Get it out of Bascom. He'll tell you ready enough, but he'll blame it on the Wendigo. Or Evelyn'll tell you. She's his daughter. She's all right yet, but some day she'll be like him. Look at his teeth and you'll see what he is!"

Clyde smiled—no doubt remembering, as Humberton did, that Bascom, the well-known criminal lawyer, had possessed rather prominent front teeth.

"All right—smile!" the driver exploded. "I done my duty. I warned you. You won't smile long after you get to the Falls!"

He sprang out of the car, started the engine with one swift pull of the crank, and slid back to his seat. The machine jumped forward.

HUMBERTON tried three or four other questions during the remainder of their ride through the summer forest. Clyde also attempted a few. But Steve Bench merely kept on driving.

When they pulled at last into a town—a town so small that Clyde referred to it as a "settlement"—and stopped before the wide veranda of a house, Bench reached for their luggage without a word and dumped it by the gate.

Humberton gazed appreciatively at the two-story, rambling structure. It was quite unlike the few other houses in sight. "Southern style," he commented.

Then the driver spoke. "Bascom's

father come from the South," he said; and, climbing back into his machine, drove away.

"Nice, cheerful devil!" Clyde spat through his teeth. "I'd like to mix it with a yegg like that. It'd be a waltz worth writing home about." He lowered his voice. "Now look what's coming!"

Near-sighted as he was, Horatio Humberton had not seen her. He looked up and saw through his thick glasses an odd little figure in a sad-colored dress, who waddled out of the front doorway and down the steps toward them.

"Miss Evelyn away. You come in. Pretty soon she come back. Pretty soon eat," she said, in a rich contralto.

"I guess that means come in, Ho," Clyde observed—and grabbed for his suitcase.

But by this time the squat little woman had reached them. She was dark, with high cheek-bones. Her black eyes looked at the big detective sternly for a moment, then she elbowed him aside, removed the suitcase from beneath his very fingers, and with a swoop possessed herself of Horatio Humberton's grip, too, and his gladstone bag. With these she led the way into the house, the men following.

"A member of one of the northern Indian tribes," Humberton whispered to his friend. "They are very strong."

Their guide mounted a wide flight of stairs, and took them down the upper hall to the rear of the house. There she laid their bags on the floor. She was between two open doors, opposite each other. Abruptly, she extended her hands, pointing to both doors at the same time, and left them.

"When ready, come down," she called back over her shoulder.

"Take your choice, Ho. I'll grab the other one," Clyde volunteered.

Humberton was already standing in the doorway of the room to Clyde's left. "This room has a fine view of the cemetery," he said. "I'll take it."

A moment later, he stood at the window through which he had glanced from the hall—the one overlooking the cemetery. It was a north window. Trees pressed it close on the farther side, like an army awaiting the zero hour to take the village by assault. No doubt they were the outposts of Devil's Wood.

With no way to explain the conviction, he felt sure that the trouble which Steve Bench wouldn't elaborate was connected with Devil's Wood, and that it was already upon Otter Falls. He stood a while at the window trying to analyze the feeling. The trees of the Wood seemed unusually close together. When they swayed in the breeze they looked to be whispering to one another. Perhaps that was why they appeared sinister and uncanny. He dismissed the problem with a shrug of his bony shoulders and went to join Clyde in the hall.

They were near the bottom of the stairs when a slim, dark-eyed girl came to meet them, and introduced herself as Evelyn Bascom. "Remember me, Mr. Humberton?" she asked, smiling. "It's been a long time—and I've grown a lot—but Dad says you have a wonderful memory."

HUMBERTON'S recollection was of a scrawny young person in pigtails. He felt ill at ease. Ladies often affected him that way. But he was of the opinion that the effect Evelyn Bascom had on him came from something more than her sex and attractiveness. He peered at her through his thick glasses, and said a very tactless thing.

"You have been crying recently."

"Well, I'll be darned, Ho!" Clyde exploded, glaring at his friend. "You old bachelors sure have a lot of sense about some things! Just forget it, Miss Bascom. I remember you, if Ho don't. I used to see you sometimes at your father's office."

"I don't mind, Mr. Clyde." She was leaning against the cheerfully papered wall, as if some sort of support was welcome. "It's just as well—" Her voice broke a little, and she stopped. When she tried to begin again and talk calmly, it was evidently no use. The words came rushing forth. "Oh, I'm worried sick! That's why I was crying! He's been gone since early morning, and I don't know where, and I don't know—"

She would have ended with an outburst of sobbing, but there was an interruption. The little Indian woman came running in from the kitchen. She put her short arm about the girl's waist, and spoke soothingly in her deep voice. "No cry. Crying no good. Mary bring him back. Mary know woods. I go."

She was off, without further ceremony; and as the front door closed behind her the girl looked up, with a smile struggling through her tears.

"There goes our supper!" she said. "All because of me. Mary never can bear to see me cry. I went outdoors to do it a while ago, but this time she caught me. We'll make out somehow, but it won't be the same as if Mary served it. Come into the dining room. While we eat, I'll tell you. Though really I don't know much about it."

She waited until they were nearly done with the simple meal. Several times, Humberton tried to draw her out, but each time she shook her head. Darkness came on, and she lighted a hanging oil lamp above the table. She laid the burnt match in a tray on the sideboard, and returned with a piece of writing paper.

"You know Dad's writing," she said, handing it to Humberton.

Humberton read it aloud. "I've gone after the damned thing. Take care of Humberton and Clyde when they come. Bench has orders to bring them up from the station."

"He went at dawn—Mary says," the girl explained. "Just after he found our dog. She woke me to tell me. But it was too late."

"What happened to the dog?" Clyde demanded, gruffly.

"You don't know, of course. It's quite a common occurrence around here. He was lying at the edge of the wood with his heart torn out."

"Devil's Wood?"

She nodded, and went on hurriedly as if she wanted to tell her story without further questions.

"I waited till noon. Dad knows how to take care of himself, so I wasn't worrying much. But when he didn't come back then, I thought it best to tell the marshal —Will Grant. He took it pretty seriously. He got Mr. Lorange, and they went to look for Dad. But I don't believe they'll go very far into Devil's Wood. They're afraid. That's the trouble about Dad—he *isn't* afraid. He may go too far. And now Mary is gone, too!"

"Mary is back," said Humberton.

He had heard and recognized the tread outside. The front door opened. They had a glimpse of the Indian woman. She passed the dining room on her way to the kitchen. Her head was down, and she did not glance in at them as she passed.

The girl ran after her. Humberton and Clyde, however, went to the front door. They were in time to meet a tall man, with a thin face, the heavy lines of which were emphasized by the glow of the lantern he was carrying.

"You are Bascom's guests?" he inquired. "I am Henry Lorange. You'll have to prepare yourselves for bad news. We've found him."

CHAPTER TWO

The Victim of the Wood

HUMBERTON persuaded the girl to remain at home, in the little Indian woman's care. He and Clyde accompanied

a trio of silent men to the outskirts of the village. All the way he was conscious of the dark forest hedging them in. The giant trees, black against a gray sky line, seemed to be pressing upon the little cluster of buildings which made up Otter Falls, as if the works of man were permitted for a while, but only until the time when the woods would close in altogether and crush them out. For some reason, the forest to the south of the village appeared friendly; but there was something heavy and menacing about that to the north—the country called "Devil's Wood." He said as much to the tall man trudging beside him.

Lorange nodded.

"Everyone notices it," he agreed. "I've been a wanderer myself, but I've never run across anything quite like this place. I do a good deal of hunting, you know—it's a passion with me—but in my five years at Otter Falls I've not had the least urge to go hunting in Devil's Wood. The country is wild, of course—thick and overgrown and almost impassable in spots—but there's more to it than that. There's something devilish in its atmosphere. You can't blame the Indians for their Wendigo legend, when white men feel that way."

Two other men were in the group—Doctor Rousseau, a slight, black-moustached man with restless dark eyes, who walked with a barely perceptible limp; and the marshal, Will Grant, who had taken occasion to mention that he was also the village funeral director. He had a broad, kindly face as smooth as a child's. Even the dancing lantern light produced no furrows in it.

Humberton waited for one of the three to speak further. Thus far he had not even inquired as to the details of Bascom's fate. His instinct told him to let the information come out unasked. In that way he might learn more.

It was Rousseau—country doctor and also coroner—who spoke. His manner was French; not so much in accent as in his gestures and the inflections of his voice.

"Blame the Indians?" he repeated, with a little, high-pitched laugh. "Did you say shall we blame them for their legend? A year ago, I had a cow—a good cow. She gave milk for my family, and we had milk to sell. One morning, I went out to milk her—very early. She was lying in her barn. The door was open. Her heart was torn out."

"A bear," said the marshal, in the tone of one who had heard the story often, and who had his answer ready.

"Certainly a bear—a very intelligent one. He was a remarkable beast, that bear. He forced the lock of my cow barn. He tore out my cow's heart. Did he eat any of the rest of her? Not at all. He took her heart. That was all he cared for, it seems—that bear!"

"You know about Bascom's dog?" Lorange inquired.

Humberton nodded. "A little," he said.

"He was found last night just beyond the graveyard—at the edge of the wood. Evelyn heard him yell—she says it was a terrible shriek—like something human. She ran out with a lantern. He was an old dog—a hound. His head had been crushed in and his heart torn out. No bear did that."

THEY were beyond the village now, walking along a narrow wagon road. Humberton surmised, if he had his directions accurate, that this road ran east and west. No doubt his imagination was playing him tricks for he felt a definite difference between the character of the woods at his left—the north, if he was not mistaken—and those on the right. He asked a casual question to make sure, and the little doctor nodded.

"Your directions are correct. This

wood to the left is the abode of that curious bear which killed my cow and poor Bascom's dog. It must be so; we never found any animal so intellectual in the south woods."

Lorange spoke. His voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "We'll be there in a moment," he said. "I understand you gentlemen are both detectives." He looked inquiringly at Humberton and Clyde. "Bascom told us something about you. For my part, I am very glad of your presence. The killing of a cow or a dog is bad enough, but murder is different. Doctor, shall I tell everything I know about the finding of the body before we actually get to it?"

"I was about to request it," said the little doctor. "I have been waiting out of respect for Mr. Humberton, so that he could first put such questions as he wished."

"Will Grant here and I found him." Lorange's thin face was set in grim lines. "I don't know just how to describe it. Still, you'll have less of a shock if I do the best I can. Bascom seems to have been killed in a most original manner—a horrible manner. A tree branch which projected at right angles from the trunk has been broken off so as to leave a sharp point, and he has been impaled upon the point. Is that correct, Will?"

The marshal grunted assent. "It sticks out behind," he added.

"The heart—" Humberton suggested.

"Nothing like that. This may not be connected with the other atrocities. We've no reason to think so, except of course that he went into Devil's Wood to learn who or what had killed his dog. We didn't take time to make much of an examination, but I imagine we'll find he was killed in the way I said."

"Anyone guarding the body?" Clyde inquired.

The marshal answered. He was evidently embarrassed. "I guess I ought to have stayed on guard. Yes, I guess I ought, all right. But the coroner had to be gone for before we moved the body. Somebody had to do that. I thought Lorange was the best man for it. And, somehow or other, I didn't feel like—"

It was a strange moment. The coroner himself relieved it. "I don't blame you in the least," he said. "If anyone in the party does, I might suggest that the examination will be difficult to make at night, so perhaps we should leave the body where it is till morning, with the critic on guard."

"I was just asking—not criticizing," Clyde explained, hastily.

Lorange stopped, and gazed slowly from one to another of the little group. "Gentlemen!" he said. He raised his lantern at arm's length. The light shone on a tangle of trees and undergrowth directly ahead. "The road turns south here—the first sharp turn since we left the village. The tree with the body impaled upon it is to the north of this bend, perhaps a hundred feet into Devil's Wood."

Still holding the lantern high, he struck into the woods. Humberton had pressed up so that he was immediately behind. Then came the other three, almost abreast.

"Just ahead," Lorange said, in a whisper. "He—"

The words choked suddenly in his throat. Horatio Humberton, peering uncertainly with his near-sighted eyes, saw why. He grabbed the lantern as it was falling from Lorange's fingers, and ran forward.

"Doctor Rousseau," he said, bending over the terrible figure on the ground, "you had better make your examination. I think the Wendigo has been here."

THE way the five of them reacted was curious. Lorange stood exactly where he had stopped, shuddering violently.

Will Grant and Clyde had come a step nearer the body. Though they were still several yards from it, they could see plainly what had happened, and they too stood in their tracks, unable to move for the moment. But the little French-Canadian doctor knelt beside the dead man, and began to comment aloud. His only sign of emotion was in the high-pitched squeak of his voice, which he could not quite control, and in a slight relapse to his native tongue.

"Mon dieu! The heart is gone! And he is on the ground, not on the tree as you said. *Mon dieu! Mon dieu!"*

Humberton, meanwhile, had straightened up again. He remained a moment gazing thoughtfully about the little clear space in which the body lay. Then he picked up the lantern, which he had set on the ground. With its help he examined the soil near the body and worked back toward a conspicuous object at the edge of the clearing—a tree which had a narrow, jagged limb projecting horizontally about waist-high. Clots of blood covered its bark, like an eruption. The light danced grimly over them and over the red-stained but sharp point at the broken end of the limb.

The coroner completed his brief examination, and rose. He looked accusingly at Lorange. "Did you take him down from the limb?"

"I did not."

"When you left him, he was impaled"—The French-Canadian pointed—"impaled there?"

Will Grant found voice—a sort of husky parody of his usual drawl. "When we left, Doc, he was hanging on the limb, facing towards the tree. It stuck out through his back. You could see its point."

The doctor nodded. "I know. There is a hole in the back of his coat. But you will notice"—he was addressing Humberton now—"that while there is another hole through the front of the coat, and through the underwear—which must be where the limb penetrated—both coat and underwear have been torn apart before this dreadful wound was made which exposed the cavity of the chest. You observe that, Mr. Humberton—and Mr. Clyde?"

"Has this Wendigo thing got hands?" Clyde asked, abruptly.

"So it is said," the doctor replied. "According to the Indian belief, it is like a man, but enormous."

"Ho, have you seen everything you want to?" the detective persisted. "I don't like this place. It gives me the willies."

"One moment, Clyde." The tall necrologist was still looking about him with great interest. "How would you say this wound was made, Doctor—the wound which exposed the heart so that it could be removed?"

"With something like a blunt knife."

"That fits right in," the marshal said, nodding gravely. "The Wendigo's a kind of an Indian god, you know; prehistoric and all that. He'd carry a stone knife."

But Humberton ignored the suggestion. "I call your attention to two things," he said to the coroner. "First, to the jagged end of the limb. It comes to quite a sharp point. Curious that the point should not be broken if it was forced through coat and body and out at the other side! Then there is the matter of blood."

"Yes! Indeed yes!" The doctor smiled approval at Humberton. "I, too, have been thinking of that. When the second wound was made and the heart removed, the blood was clotted. It would not spatter greatly. But the first wound—it should have released much blood. I do not see that blood. Where is it?"

Before Humberton could reply, Clyde whirled suddenly. "Stick 'em up!" he snapped.

A gun was in his hand. It was leveled

at a vague figure back toward the road from which they had come. The figure halted.

"Thought you might need a stretcher," it said, without excitement. "I got one and trailed your light."

"It's Bench." The marshal, upon whose forehead drops of sweat had appeared, grinned his relief. "He helps around when I've got a funeral. Thanks, Bench. We'll need it all right."

Bench walked up unhurriedly, the stretcher packed on his back. Though the night wind blew cold, his hairy chest was still exposed. He gazed a moment at the corpse, looked from it to the jagged limb which the coroner was examining, and smiled, grimly.

"A stake through the heart!" he said. "Might have cured him if his master hadn't stolen his heart. He'll walk yet!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Cursed Are the Dead"

HUMBERTON contrived to return with the coroner some paces behind the silent procession which was taking Bascom home. He wanted to talk with the little doctor, and he found Rousseau very willing.

"This man Bench—you think him a queer character—no?" Rosseau inquired.

"I have been wondering whether he is quite sane," Humberton replied.

The French-Canadian chuckled. "And *I* have been wondering whether you thought that. My good friend, Humberton, have you a hobby? It must be so. All of us—we have our hobbies. And along that line are you perhaps a little crazy? This Bench is not a bright man. But he can read. And what does he read? About vampires—about the 'un-dead'—those terrible beings who have died and who then come back to attack their fellow men. He reads these things—for years he reads them—and he believes. That is his hobby. You understand?"

Humberton did not answer at once. He was watching the bobbing lantern ahead. To his near-sighted eyes it was a moving blur of yellow light which made only partly visible the burden the men were carrying. The whispering trees of Devil's Wood, so near that their clutching twigs stroked his face now and then as he passed them, seemed more real than the lantern or the figure on the stretcher, or even the men. At that moment he understood instinctively much that his mind failed to grasp. But he was determined not to let the queer spell of the place get him. He said suddenly: "The vampire sucks the blood of his victims. That is how he keeps a kind of life in his own dead body. He doesn't remove the heart."

"The Wendigo does—the Wendigo of Otter Falls." Rousseau tramped in silence for a moment, then went on. "You must understand, my friend Humberton, that this Steve Bench has never accepted the Wendigo story. He has held that there is no such Indian god. He says these curious atrocities have been done by a vampire. And he suspected Bascom. Why? Because Bascom had a sharp front tooth! *Mon dieu,* it is a scandal! May not a man use the teeth the good Lord gives him? Must he pull out a sound tooth because it is sharp, and buy him a false one? Incredible! But this Bench goes yet further, as you heard for yourself. He holds, it seems, that though a stake through the heart will kill a vampire—it is a cure the world over—yet if the father of vampires, the Devil, steals that heart, then the vampire shall walk again. I ask you, is that logical?"

"Cursed are the dead who die in the Devil," Humberton said, gravely; and the doctor laughed.

"That is very clever. It is the inver-

sion of some words in the Burial Service —is it not? Only there the dead are called blessed, because they die in the Lord. We are nearing the village. I will run ahead and talk to Evelyn. I know her well. She will be brave. But she should be prepared."

For a short distance Humberton walked by himself; then Clyde dropped back. "Don't they fix vampires by skewering them with a stake, Ho?" he inquired; and when his friend assented, he went on: "What say we get the marshal to throw Bench in the cooler? He's the little vampire fancier. With those shoulders of his, he could stick a man as easy as I could a butterfly. I think we've got darned good grounds for an arrest on suspicion, if you ask me!"

He was evidently indignant when the necrologist replied: "I think not, Clyde. His chest is too dirty."

But there was no time for questions. They had reached the village. Doctor Rousseau had vanished into the Bascom house, in the lower story of which one dim light flickered. Now, between the time of the detective's suggestion and Humberton's obscure rejoinder, the front door of the house opened, and Evelyn stood there. The doctor was just behind her, a lamp in his hand.

Her voice came, low and distinct. "Bring him in."

THEY all filed in. She stood backed against the wall, her lips tightly compressed, her eyes straight before her. Only once did her gaze waver. It was when they passed in front of her, with the stretcher bearing her father's body. The marshal had thrown his coat and sweater over the face and the terrible torso. Clad in red flannel shirt and pants he carried the rear handles of the stretcher. In the room the Indian woman was busy lighting another lamp.

"Will you come upstairs, Evelyn?" the doctor asked.

"I'll go get my wife and some of the other women," Grant volunteered.

"I don't want them," the girl said, slowly. She stood with clenched hands. "Promise me you won't embalm him. He never wanted to be embalmed. You must take care of him tonight, Mr. Grant, and he must be buried tomorrow. He's told me all that, over and over. It's what he wanted. You must promise."

Rousseau silently nodded to the marshal. "All right, Evelyn," Grant promised. "Now you must—"

"I know," she interrupted. Her voice held steady, but there was no life in it. "I'll go upstairs. You can let me see him in the morning—when you're ready. I don't want the women. I don't want anyone. I just want to—" She turned and ran up the stairs. There was the sound of a slamming door.

"Can I help?" Humberton asked Grant. "You know, I am a funeral director.

The red-shirted marshal-undertaker nodded, gratefully. "Glad to have you, sir. Awful glad. I never handled a job like this in all my life. I've had some bad ones, but nothing like this. It'll be all right to bury him tomorrow, Doc, if we get him coffined up tonight?"

"I think so. I'll stay with you while you work. It will be a kind of inquest. After all, what more can a coroner do?"

Steve Bench had been looking down with set face at the still covered form. Now he said, gruffly: "Doc, I object. You daren't leave him alone. It won't do."

The little doctor's eyes flashed. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing to take offense on. It's fine to bury him quick. I don't mean that. Only I don't want him left by himself after we get him coffined. Someone will have to watch by him."

"Will you watch?" the doctor asked, sharply.

"Sure I will! I'm not afraid of no—"

"You say anything against this dead man, and you're under arrest right now!" the marshal blazed. His usually smooth, placid face was afire with resentment.

"I didn't mean nothing. All I want to do is watch him. Some of the rest of you can keep me company, or I'll do it by myself. That's all I want."

"You can have your wish," the coroner said, quietly. "Do you want him to bring up the coffin, Grant?"

"I'll go with him. We'll have to bring a number of things."

IT WAS thus that an oddly mated pair came to keep vigil together a little later on the stairs. What the undertaker needed had been brought in. Grant, Humberton and Rousseau were busy behind a closed door. Lorange, learning that he could do nothing further, was gone. That left Steve Bench and Clyde. Clyde was free to retire and get some sleep, but he preferred to sit on a stair and converse in whispers with the hairy-chested Bench. Even the oil lamp left in the hall was bright enough to prove that this same chest was dirty—filthy, in fact—with the unwashed grime of months. Clyde failed to see how it cleared Bench of the crime.

But he kept the thought to himself. What he said was: "There's lots of things I'd rather do than watch beside a corpse."

"Better watch him than let him walk," Bench replied.

"Look here." Clyde laid a hand on the grimy one's knee. "I knew Bascom when he was a lawyer. He was a pretty good scout. Maybe he skinned the law awful close sometimes, but they all do. What have you got against him?"

Bench had been staring moodily at the stairs below him. Now he lifted his dull, heavy countenance, and looked Clyde in the face. "You're a detective, ain't you?" he demanded.

Clyde nodded.

"I'm going to tell you. It's my duty. Bascom's father was one of 'em. He lived at the Falls. After he'd been buried a week, the folks got together at night and drove a stake through his heart. After that he stayed in his grave. But they weren't quick enough. He'd begun already to come back and suck his own children's blood. That makes the sons the same as the father. Bascom's brother —he looked like Bascom, had the same kind of teeth—got so bad he went away one night. They say he didn't rightly die —the devil just took him. Bascom himself learned to be a lawyer. I guess he thought it might save him if he left the Falls. Maybe he was a good lawyer—I don't say no. But I'm telling you *he was one of 'em,* just the same!"

"A vampire?" Clyde demanded, skeptically.

"That's what they're called."

"Do you know what we'd do with you in Cleveland?" the detective asked, sternly. "We'd throw you in the booby hatch!"

Whether Bench understood Clyde's language or not, he merely grinned. It was an unpleasant grin. "Wait and see!" he said.

"Have you said anything like this to the girl?"

"Listen, mister." Bench glanced apprehensively up the stairs. "I'm awful sorry for that girl. She'll be in more danger tonight than if there was a tiger loose. It's *their* nature, when they come back, to go for the people they loved most. That's why I want to watch him, as long as he's lying in this house. Once he's in the ground, I know ways to make him safe. It's tonight I'm scared of."

Clyde laughed, sarcastically; but he was relieved when the shut door opened at last and Humberton came out. The necrologist was yawning.

"I regret we were not permitted to embalm him, Clyde," he said. "The job would

have offered some interesting problems. As it is, he is quite presentable. Do you care to inspect our work?"

Clyde did not.

"Then suppose we go to bed." Humberton yawned again. "In the morning we can look into this further."

"I'm not so awful sleepy, Ho. I've a good mind to sit up."

"No doubt Bench will be glad of company in his watch beside the body," Humberton suggested; but Clyde shook his head.

"He won't have *my* company. I was thinking, maybe, I could sit up in your room. Then if anything happened—"

Humberton stifled a grin, and said, gravely: "I have a double bed in my room, Clyde. Suppose we sleep together. After all, there is no good reason for disarranging two beds at such a time as this."

CLYDE accepted the offer eagerly. After they reached the room, he showed remarkable speed—for a man who was not sleepy—in undressing and getting into bed. Humberton undressed quickly, too, but stood a while at the window in his pajamas, after blowing out the lamp.

"This view of the graveyard fascinates me, Clyde," he observed. "The moon is behind clouds just now, but enough of its light filters through to give the woods an odd appearance of movement. The graves, too—some of them appear to be positively bulging, as if the occupants were pushing upward in their efforts to escape. What a thrilling ingredient would be added to life if our loved ones—or some of them—returned to suck our blood! I almost envy Bench his conviction that Bascom was a vampire."

"Do you mind coming to bed, Ho?" Clyde demanded, savagely.

Humberton sighed, and came. He stretched out beside the big detective, and promptly fell asleep.

He must have been tired, whether Clyde was or not, for he slept profoundly. After a time, however, it seemed to Humberton's slumbering brain that his friend was talking. He wove the talk into various dream combinations, and slept on. But a tremendous thump in the side finally woke him.

"Darn you, Ho, are you asleep or dead?" Clyde was demanding, in an excited whisper. "I've been talking to you for the last five minutes. There's something queer happening outside."

The necrologist sat up in bed. "What?" he asked.

"I don't know. I want you with me when I go to the window. It's a kind of scratching—as if something was crawling up the vines on the side of the house."

Humberton slid out of bed. The room was not entirely dark. A pale shaft of moonlight slanted through the window and buried itself in the carpeted floor near the bed.

Clyde followed his friend to the window, and they gazed out at the silent landscape. The vines were moving softly in the night breeze.

"Imagination, Clyde," Humberton said, gently. "You are rather overwrought—no wonder. We'll go back to bed, and I hope you can sleep."

"All right, Ho." Clyde turned slowly from the window. "It's funny, though. I could have sworn—"

A scream split the still night. It seemed from near at hand in the house. It came once more, trickled down to a sobbing moan of terror, then rose again as a girl's voice shrieked: "Father! No, no! Don't touch me, Father! Don't—touch—me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Walking Corpse

ALL THE indecision was gone from Clyde's voice now. "It's something in the girl's room. Man or devil, we've got

to get him! Come on, Ho—come on!"

He ran to the hall door and tore it open. Humberton, about to follow, paused, and felt in his pocket for a match. His hand was shaking, but he managed to light the lamp and carry it with him into the hall.

"Which room is it, Ho?" Clyde demanded, excitedly.

The little Indian maid answered. She was shuffling toward them, clad in a grotesque pink-and-white night gown.

"Miss Evelyn room this one." She pointed to the door next to Humberton's. Clyde shook the handle. The door was locked. He pounded on the heavy oak, but there was no response.

"No doubt she has fainted," Humberton suggested.

"Or something worse. Come on, Ho—we've got to break it down. And it's going to take some breaking."

Without waiting for help, he crashed his shoulder against it. The door merely trembled.

"Bolted! Feels like a heavy bar right across the door. Darn these old-fashioned houses! Let's hit it together, Ho."

"What's all this?"

Bench stood behind them. His heavy face was puckered in a yawn. A few words of explanation from Humberton, and he started violently. "That's what woke me! I thought I heard a scream." A strange light came into his dull eyes. "Say—I didn't look in the coffin before I come up. I'm going back to—"

But Humberton barred his way. "The girl screamed once and has been silent since," he said. "We must break this door down."

"Guess you're right." Bench reached a great paw toward Clyde, who was setting himself for another blow, and pushed the big detective as if he had been a child. "Let me at it."

He gathered himself together a moment, then flung his great shoulder against the door. It was like a plunge of an elephant. Something cracked. He struck it again. There was a rending sound. A third tremendous smash, and he fell forward with the door beneath him.

Lamp in hand, Humberton stepped over him into the room. The bed stood in the middle, its foot toward the single window. Yellow lamplight and white moonlight blended to reveal a red blotch on the snowy linen. Clyde cursed under his breath at sight of it, but his friend did not wait to examine the linen. He stepped around the bed to a pathetically crumpled figure lying on the floor just beyond it.

"Water!" he said, sharply.

"Water here." The Indian woman had some in a wash basin.

Humberton glanced up at her with a smile of appreciation.

"Dead?" Clyde demanded, anxiously.

"She is in a faint." Humberton dashed water into the white face. The little Indian dropped to her knees and began chafing her mistress' hands. Bench stood on the fallen door, his mouth open, his eyes staring with the dumb concern of a curious animal.

EVELYN'S eyelids fluttered, and instantly Humberton left her to the maid's ministrations. He rose, a little stiffly, and lamp in hand bent over the red blotch on the bed.

"Clyde! Look at this!"

Clyde scrutinized the stain a moment, and whistled. "That's queer, Ho. It looks like dried blood to me."

Humberton flicked the sheet with his forefinger.

"Dried—but not dried on the fabric," he said. "It was already clotted before it was placed there." He glanced at the busy little woman and her reviving charge. "I suppose you noticed, Clyde, that there was no mark of blood on her? She seems quite uninjured, so far as I can tell without a careful examination."

"Then where did it come from?" the detective asked.

But Humberton shook his head. "These are deep waters," he said. "Our friend over there—" he nodded toward the inquisitive Bench—"appears to have forgotten what he had in mind a few minutes ago. Bench—you haven't looked into the coffin yet!"

The hairy-chested Samson grinned, sheepishly. "I did forget that, didn't I?" he admitted. "I've left him alone, too—must be fifteen minutes. I'll go look now."

Humberton gazed thoughtfully at Clyde, and listened in silence to Bench's heavy departing footsteps. "Of course, he won't find anything," he said, at length. "I mean—anything—missing. Still—" He stopped, and the detective nodded.

"That's funny blood, Ho; darned funny blood."

"It is." Humberton peered at the stain again, through his thick glasses. "Notice its clotted, rather powdery condition. I don't like even to suggest such an outlandish thing, Clyde, but I have done a great deal of embalming, as you know"—he lowered his voice to a whisper—"and this blood does bear a curious resemblance to the blood of—"

A great bass bellow interrupted him; a bellow of fear and rage from below stairs. It was the mighty voice of the man Bench. "He's gone! He's gone!" It was shouting.

"Come Clyde!"

But even as he reached the door, Humberton remembered, and turned to look at Evelyn Bascom. She was sitting up, her eyes wide and fearful, while the little Indian woman talked to her soothingly.

"Tell me what you saw," Humberton said, peremptorily. "I must know at once."

She seemed to become aware of him for the first time. "Don't take the lamp," she moaned.

He set it upon a chair. "Now you can tell me." He was speaking gently again. "You thought you saw something. It frightened you, and you fainted. What was it, my dear? What did you see?"

Suddenly, she hid her face in her hands, while the maid patted her shoulder. But in a moment she spoke, though without uncovering her face. "I saw—my father!"

Humberton jerked his head toward the detective. "Go down and look after that fellow below, Clyde," he said. "I must talk to Evelyn. This is more important than anything he can tell. Now, my dear." He walked around the foot of the bed, and sat on the floor beside her. "Would you like to get into bed again?"

She shook her head.

"Where did you see him? Where was he?"

"There!" She pointed toward the open window.

"Then he didn't come in?"

"He came in." She stopped, and her eyes turned toward the bed as if she half expected to see something there. When her gaze met only the rumpled covers, she went on a little more easily. "I was lying awake. I couldn't sleep. There was a noise outside—like something scratching against the house. I sat up and looked at the window. He—"

Humberton patted her hand. "You must try to go on. It is very important."

"I'll go on. He was looking in at me. It was like a nightmare. I couldn't scream till he climbed in and reached toward me." She paused and shook her head, uncertainly. "I don't seem to remember any more."

"You must have thrown yourself out of bed and fainted." He listened a moment. Loud and excited voices were coming from downstairs. "Tell me, my dear—did your father look—as he always looked?"

"He looked terrible—like a beast. There was blood on his face. I could see that when he climbed into the room."

HUMBERTON rose, and with a sudden thought gathered up the coverlet, folded it carefully to conceal the bloody patch, and laid it over his arm. "I'm going to tell you something, my dear," he said. "You will find it hard to believe, but you must believe it. You have had a dream—a hideous and very vivid dream. Often people who have gone through terrible emotional stress—as you did today—have dreams of that sort; dreams so vivid they can't be distinguished from reality. I wish it were possible for your father to come back, but it is not. I am an undertaker. I helped care for his remains. So I can tell you that positively. Now, I want you to go back to bed, in the care of this good woman here, and try to sleep. You will stay with her?" he asked the little Indian.

"I stay with her—always."

"That's fine. But be sure you stay tonight. I'll shut the window, so that it won't induce any more bad dreams."

"She come my room. No see window any more."

"Still better!" He smiled, genially. Nevertheless, he stepped to the window, glanced out swiftly, and observed that some of the thick vines just below it were broken and torn away. Then he shut it and went out into the dark hall.

"Make it snappy, Ho!" It was Clyde's voice from below.

Humberton responded, felt his way to the stairs, and once there had the benefit of the light coming through the dining room from the open doorway of the living room, were Bench had kept his vigil. Bench himself was standing in that doorway, with Clyde just behind him.

"He's gone, Ho," the detective declared, solemnly. "Come and get an eyeful for yourself."

Humberton put his finger to his lips for silence, and pointed up the stairs. He hurried into the room then, shutting the door behind him.

The truth of Clyde's statement was clear. The coffin lay on the floor, side uppermost, empty. One of the front windows was wide open; the curtains were blowing about. Humberton put a question to Bench. "We left the windows closed. Did you open this?"

"I didn't open nothing."

"Show me where you sat."

Bench pointed to a comfortable rocker in a corner. Humberton stepped over to it and seated himself.

"You could see the body from here. Did you sleep at all?"

The self-appointed watchman nodded. "I watched him pretty close at first," he said. "After a while I guess I must have dropped off. I was sure nodding when that screetch came. I jumped up as if the Devil himself had yelled, and run up the stairs. I seemed to forget the body and everything."

"So the coffin might have been overturned before you left the room?"

But at this Bench shook his head, positively. "Not on your life! I'd have noticed that. The coffin was right where it belonged. Anyway, I don't sleep that good, mister. When that box was knocked over, it made some noise. Only we were making a racket ourselves, breaking into the girl's room, we'd have heard it."

Clyde evidently had gone for his flashlight. He was at the window. Shivering, as the wind made free with the legs of his pajamas, he was showing devotion to duty by playing the light back and forth over the ground beneath the window.

"We're in luck, Ho," he announced. "There's a leaky spout or something, and the ground's damp right here. Ought to be some footsteps." He bent nearly double over the sill. "Yessir! There they are! The fellow that stole the body

jumped out this way. Have a look."

"First, I shall dress," the necrologist replied. "I am to near-sighted to see much through the window. You'd better get into your clothes, too, Clyde. You'll have no more sleep tonight."

Humberton was never slow at dressing —even in the dark. After putting on his clothing, he took time, in returning through the hallway, to listen intently at several closed doors—without hearing anything—but he was downstairs before Clyde, and out in the yard with the detective's flashlight. He went on hands and knees to examine the damp clay beneath the window.

"What do you make of it, Clyde?" he demanded, as his friend clattered down the steps.

Clyde took the flashlight and examined the ground. "Looks like he slipped, don't it, Ho? I couldn't catch that from where I was at the window. Seems to have landed on his soles and heels all right, but where the ground slopes a bit, before the grass starts, you get the backs of his shoes. Wait a minute!" He too, knelt beside the prints. "Here's something I don't savvy, at all. Was it the backs of the shoes that made those prints?"

"I think so," Humberton agreed.

"But it looks like they were laced there. Shoes don't lace up the back."

Horatio Humberton hesitated before replying; then he said: "One kind of shoe does, Clyde—the kind we used on Bascom. Those shoes are made to lace in back as well as in front for the funeral director's convenience. They are shoes for the dead."

CHAPTER FIVE

Man or Devil?

CLYDE gestured peremptorily to the necrologist. "Come here, Ho. I want to talk to you. I've *got* to talk to you—before I go crazy. I'm half crazy now."

Humberton followed. Clyde led him around the corner of the house. The man Bench, who had stepped out with a lantern, was left by the moist place beneath the window, dully examining the footprints. Clyde continued to walk on until they were in the rear of the sprawling old mansion, where the moonlight still shone on its veil of vines and also on the graveyard beyond.

There Clyde stopped. His round, honest face was drawn and anxious. "Am I a coward, Ho?" he demanded. "Would you call me a coward?"

"You are one of the bravest men I know," the necrologist assured him, gently.

"Thanks." The detective laughed—a short, rather embarrassed laugh. "You'll think me nutty to ask a thing like that, but I don't mind telling you this business has got me. Honest, Ho—there aren't any vampires, are there? Dead men can't walk, can they?"

At another time—or from someone other than Clyde, who had often risked his life in the line of duty—the question might have been amusing. Humberton did not smile. He was silent and thoughtful for a long space before replying.

"I don't want you to misunderstand me, Clyde," he said, at last. "I'm not superstitious. But I do try to be open-minded. By any of the laws of nature which we know there are no such things as vampires. I've handled thousands of dead bodies, and I have never found the corpse of a man to have any more strength or consciousness than a dog's. Does that answer your question?"

Clyde shook his head. "Go on. You're holding something back," he said.

"I'm holding back nothing that I know of my own knowledge. But some vampire stories—especially in European countries—are remarkably well attested. If the

dead have not left their graves at times to prey upon the living, then much evidence which would seem good enough for a court of law is false."

"That means the girl might have seen her father?"

Humberton shook his head. "That was a dream."

"How about the blood on the covers?" Clyde shot his flashlight suddenly at the rear of the house. "Look at those vines—all torn and pulled away where something climbed up!"

"I mean that the resemblance to her father's face was a dream resemblance."

"Then how do you explain the footprints?"

Before the necrologist could reply to this, a figure came around the corner of the house. It was Evelyn Bascom, fully dressed. At sight of them she gave a little cry of relief. "I hoped I'd find you here! Bench said you'd gone this way. I know about the empty coffin, Mr. Humberton. I know all the rest, too. Bench told me. You'll—you'll try to find him, won't you?"

Humberton was still hesitating when she went on, swiftly: "I know it's hard. But Mary will go with you. She's an Indian. She can track her way better than any white man. You can leave first thing in the morning."

Clyde glanced at the radium dial of his wrist watch. "That'll give him five or six hours start," he said.

"Am I to understand, Clyde, that you suggest starting tonight?"

Had it been daylight, the detective might have noticed the ghost of an ironic smile on his friend's face; but he answered, doggedly: "I'll go with you this minute, Ho, if you say the word."

The girl took him up at once. "Bench can stay in the house. I'm not afraid. I'll tell Mary to get ready."

"Well, Clyde," Humberton said, laughing, as she left them, "we seem to be in for it."

"You don't want to wait till morning, yourself," Clyde countered.

"Perhaps not," his friend returned, thoughtfully. "No, I think not. You're right, Clyde. Whatever the nature of this thing we are after, it has always struck at night. We must track it down. It may have a secure hiding-place in the daytime."

"Think we'd better rout out any of the others, Ho—the sheriff or the coroner, or that fellow Lorange?"

"Would you like them with us, Clyde?"

"Not for me," the detective returned. "You and I and the Indian are a great plenty, I'd say. If we had any more, we might as well carry a brass band."

BENCH awaited them in the hall when they returned to the house. His heavy countenance was wrinkled in a sour grin. "Call it Wendigo, or Devil, or Bascom," he growled, thrusting his unshaven chin close to Humberton's face. "It don't matter. Know what I think? Bascom was sick three years ago—awful sick. I think he died and something else took over his body. The girl has her suspicions, too. Was she glad when he come back? Answer me that. Was she glad?"

"Is Doctor Rousseau married?" Humberton demanded, sternly ignoring the man's question.

"Sure."

"Get him—and Mrs. Rousseau. I want them to take charge of Evelyn. Mr. Clyde and Mary and I will be away for a while."

Instead of taking offense from his curt attitude, the deep-chested man smiled and nodded. "You're going after him. Taking an Indian. Good! Let me tell you something—I've got a dog. Take him, too."

"That's the idea!" agreed Clyde, excitedly. "That's what we want! A dog!"

Though Humberton was less enthusiastic, he unbent on the arrival of the dog—a cross-bred beagle with a limp—and patted the animal's head, receiving a lick of the hand in return.

"Got caught in a trap once," Bench explained. "Maybe he won't run right up to the Devil for you, but he'll track him down."

"Better have him smell the footprints, Ho," Clyde suggested.

But Humberton shook his head. Instead, he went upstairs and brought down the coverlet with the blood mark on it. The beagle sniffed at it in the front hall, and reported his findings with a peculiar hoarse growl.

Before they left, Doctor Rousseau and his wife were there. She was a little, dark-eyed woman who could have passed for his sister.

"We take Evelyn to our own home," the doctor announced. "Bench can stand guard here. Shall I go with you?" he continued, anxiously.

But Humberton shook his head. "You may be needed in the village," he said. "If I were you, I would take Bench, too, and also rouse the sheriff and Lorange. Let all of you be on guard. This is your night of peril. Something is abroad from the woods which your families should not see, much less encounter."

"Something? What?" As he asked the question, the little doctor, standing in the hall, glanced into the living room at the empty casket.

Humberton met his gaze. "Ask Evelyn what she saw," he said. "Come, Mary."

The Indian woman, dressed in rough trousers and sweater, was with them. She grasped the dog's leash, and started without a word. Somewhere, Clyde had found a lantern. He carried it, swinging, and saved his flashlight for emergencies. They were hardly beyond the cluster of houses when he put a pointed question to his friend.

"Didn't you tell me she had a dream, Ho?"

"I changed my mind."

"O. K. You've got a right to do that. But you'll certainly have the little doc walking careful and looking behind him the rest of this night. What made you change it?"

But the necrologist shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. "The footprints? The torn vines? Perhaps both of those influenced me, Clyde. But most of all, I think, it was the dog. I never heard a dog growl just like that before."

THE night had turned cloudy and veiled the moon, except for fleeting patches of dim light. The path was darker than it had been. But it was the same path they had taken earlier in the evening. Nose to ground, the dog traced it, pulling on his leash as if the scent was urgent and strong. He ran in silence except for an occasional growl.

"He afraid," said the Indian woman—the first words she had uttered.

"What's he afraid of, Mary?" Clyde inquired.

"Wendigo," she answered, simply.

"There you are, Ho! What a fine marathon this is for a couple of city hounds! I'd rather be taking a ride with a bunch of gangsters. Does it get you that way? Are you jittery like I am?"

"Quiet, Clyde," Humberton cautioned.

After a time, they found it hard to keep up. The Indian woman, for all her squat build, seemed to have something of the dog's endurance. She trotted rather than walked. Often running beyond the circle of lantern light, she still had no trouble to pick her way. The two city men behind her stumbled over occasional

roots and stones in the path. At last, Humberton remonstrated.

"He go woods now," she answered. "Devil's Wood. No go fast. I make talk for spirits."

The dog had indeed turned in between the big trees, but she thrust the leash into Clyde's hand and raised both her own arms high. For a moment she was silent. There was no sound but the beagle's busy sniffing and the peculiarly menacing whisper of the forest. Then she began to speak.

It was no language either of the men knew. The words ran in a guttural monotone, with an occasional ascent to a higher register which sounded queer and weird by comparison. The dog cowered and whimpered as if he understood. The trees seemed to have crowded up to hear. At length, the squat little woman finished speaking and stood listening. That, it seemed, was harder for Clyde to bear than her wild, low-pitched talk. He fidgeted, set the lantern down, picked it up again, gazed skyward at the patch of scudding mouse-colored clouds above the tree-tops, and breathed hard. But all the while Humberton watched the dog.

After an interminable time, she lowered her hands and shook her head. "No can hear answer," she said.

"That means we shall go where the dog leads us," Humberton returned, briskly. "Will you take the leash again?"

She did so, reluctantly. It was evident she had wanted permission from some unseen source to invade the wood, and this permission had not come. Clyde started to suggest something of the kind to his friend, but the tall necrologist shut him up.

"Keep your eyes on the dog," he said, testily. "He's acting strangely."

And indeed he was. Out on the path he had gone forward with zest—nose down and tail up and quivering. His had been the usual attitude of a dog on a scent, with the occasional exception that he growled in a peculiar key. Now, he was crawling forward on his belly. His hair was pricked up, his tail low. He was a dog afraid of the unknown, but still carrying on.

"What's he scared of?" Clyde asked.

"If we knew that, it might be far better for us," Humberton answered.

But Mary heard the question and replied with the one word she had used before. "Wendigo!"

CLYDE had been walking a little ahead of his friend. He dropped back, and lowered his voice.

"Do you know, Ho, this is an awful thick woods. Just look at that close growth on each side of us! It's a good thing we've got a dog and an Indian along, or we'd have the time of our lives. I'd hate to try and find the way out for myself, even now."

Humberton nodded. "You have your gun?" he asked, abruptly.

"As long as I'm wearing pants I've got my gun."

"Carry it in your hand."

Clyde obeyed, but the suggestion did not ease his mind. He kept closer now to the necrologist. The distance widened between them and the little Indian woman with the dog. The animal continued to whimper and growl, but he was no longer crawling. The scent seemed to have become very hot. Suddenly, he gave a hoarse bark, leapt forward, and was gone into the underbrush.

Mary held up her hand with the dangling leash. "Broke," she explained, curtly. "Rope no good."

"We mustn't let him get away," Humberton told her.

"I follow."

"Come on, Ho. If she can follow him, we can follow her!"

But it was hard. The Indian woman snatched Clyde's lantern and plunged into the thick of the brush, exactly as the dog had done. Somehow, she forced a passage. Clyde, much stronger no doubt, but also broader of shoulder and taller, kept behind her only by powerful effort. Humberton's task was easier, as the path opened by the Indian and widened by Clyde's body proved ample for him.

From somewhere far ahead there came a cry—such a cry as a dog gives only in mortal anguish. It was not a bark nor a howl. Yet as it came between the tree trunks, rising to a high-pitched scream of agony then stopping short on its highest note, it was unmistakably a dog's cry; and there was no room for doubt as to what it meant.

The Indian woman answered it with a guttural cry of her own, and fought her way forward faster than ever. Clyde swore. What he accomplished merely to keep her plunging lantern in sight was a notable feat of strength. At last the lantern stopped. Clyde made his way almost to where it was, hesitated, and waited for Humberton. Mary was squatted on the ground beside th dog's reddening body.

At Humberton's approach, she looked up. "Wendigo!" she said, simply. "Heart torn out!"

CHAPTER SIX

Death Hunts the Hunters

CAREFULLY — almost reverently — Humberton turned the pitiful little body over. He made a swift examination. His long fingers worked with the easy skill of a surgeon. When he had finished, he looked up at the detective, and his eyes were shining.

"Clyde, I want you to see this. Stoop closer."

Clyde gasped at what he saw. "There's a hole in the back—like he'd been impaled, too."

"But he wasn't impaled—there was not time for it."

"Then what made the hole?" Clyde demanded.

"His life went out through that hole. Look still more carefully, Clyde. I see something else. I'd rather have you notice it yourself, without any suggestion from me. Observe this torn flesh, through which the heart was removed. Then try to remember back to how Bascom looked."

On his knees beside the dog's body, Clyde made as careful an examination as his friend had done. Suddenly, he started with astonishment. "I get you, Ho! Bascom's wound looked like it had been torn with claws or a stone knife or something like that. This one is clean cut. A regular hunting knife did this."

Humberton nodded, with a smile. "I think we're progressing, Clyde. We have demonstrated that our Wendigo carries some modern equipment, as well as—possibly—the flint weapons of an Indian god. We can say, too, that he has a bow-and-arrow. And he must be very skilful in their use. This poor animal was killed with an arrow, and the arrow was immediately cut out—with a sharp knife. A flint knife would have taken too long. Then the heart was removed, and a little miscellaneous tearing of flesh was indulged in, to make the wound look like Bascom's. Mary, can you follow this killer?"

The little Indian woman's beadlike black eyes flashed, as if the beads had been shaken. "I follow," she replied.

"Not too fast, then," Clyde suggested.

"It should be easier now, Clyde. What we are following has only two legs."

"Two legs, and wears dead men's shoes!" Clyde retorted, gruffly. "Come on, Ho!"

Indian Mary had been circling about—

something like a dog, herself. With a grunt she started off. She headed due north, straight at what looked to be an impenetrable lacework of trees and creepers. With her head close to the ground and the lantern held above her, she skirted the biggest of the trees and found an opening.

"Killer go this way," she announced.

"He would. Sure he would!" Clyde agreed, savagely. "It's the toughest going there is around here!"

They forced a way through that thicket and into a worse.

"Blood!" Mary exclaimed, gleefully. She pointed at a stain on a leaf at the level of her own head.

Humberton, following in Clyde's footsteps, merely glanced at it, and laughed, softly. "You seemed puzzled, Clyde, when I hinted that the crusted dirt on Bench's chest cleared him of mutilating Bascom. No man could do a thing like that—or like this latest atrocity—without being spattered with blood. Bench's chest was not spattered—and he certainly hadn't washed his chest. He might have worn something ingenious to protect him, but that's hardly in Bench's psychology."

"Well, this fellow got plenty bloody," Clyde commented. He indicated another reddened leaf which he had found without Mary's aid. It grew at about the level of his own chest.

SOON all his attention was required for the mere task of following. The little Indian woman seemed to find her way by instinct. She seldom had to search for the marks which the killer had made in forcing a path through the thick growth. She took what appeared the likely trail, and merely checked it at intervals. Clyde groaned, but did not try to stop her. He had stuck the revolver back into his pocket. He needed both hands. Humberton's arms, long and wiry, proved excellent guards for his face. By keeping head down and hands well forward he maintained the pace.

Suddenly, Mary stopped. "Listen!" she whispered.

Something was moving, only a short distance ahead.

She bent swiftly, and before either man could object—if either had a mind to—she had turned out the lantern. Instantly, darkness, thick and terrible was on them. Humberton could not distinguish his detective friend, three paces away. Not till he heard her whisper again did he know that the Indian woman was beside him.

"I go look," she was saying.

"Mary! No!" he exclaimed; but the only response was a very faint movement of leaves, as she slipped off.

"Now we are in a hell of a mess!" Clyde said, fervently, from the nearby darkness. "We started with a dog and an Indian. The dog's dead and the Indian's gone. I'm asking you, Ho—do we ever get out of this place? Or do we settle down in some tree and spend our old age?"

"At present, we wait—and keep still," Humberton returned.

"O. K., Ho." There was a deep sigh from the darkness. "A fine bloody vacation this turned out to be!"

With that, Clyde subsided. They listened. The little Indian woman was a mistress of woodcraft. No further sound came from her. But there were other sounds. The wind through the thickly woven leaves and branches had a disquieting quality, like the soft moaning of children. Though Humberton counted himself a man of steady nerves and well controlled imagination, he did not like that sound. He longed to talk to Clyde. At length, as a substitute for speech, he put out a hand at random and managed to touch his friend.

The instant response was a furious

blow from the detective's fist. In grazing Humberton's head it almost cost him his balance. He let out an involuntary cry, and Clyde laughed.

"Guess I took you for the Wendigo, Ho," he apologized. "Next time, say something first. Gee, I wish that Indian would come back!"

"I am afraid for her," Humberton said.

"I guess she's tracking down whatever it was she heard . . . Ho!" Clyde's whisper became excited. "She didn't take the lantern, did she?"

"It is here."

"Well, I see a light. It sure *is* a light. It—"

"Shoot at it!" snapped Humberton.

Clyde hesitated the merest fraction of a second. Then his gun roared. The flash of it had hardly died when another sound cut through the moan of the wind—a clear, musical twang. That was followed by a single scream.

"I'm on my way, Ho!" the detective said between his teeth. "The light's gone, but I know about where it was."

THIS time, Humberton could not follow. Clyde was off, bursting a way by main strength. He could be heard falling, cursing, floundering on again. If he remembered the flashlight in his pocket, he had not bothered to take it out. He seemed determined, instead, to blast a straight way toward the spot in the darkness where the point of light had been.

Suddenly, the varied sounds of his progress ceased. He called, guardedly: "I've found her, Ho!"

Humberton's ears were far keener than his eyes. Again swinging his long arms before him, he struggled toward Clyde's voice. The detective did not call again, but soon his friend heard him say, hardly louder than a whisper: "Right here, Ho."

Almost at that moment a jutting rock turned Humberton's foot, and he fell sprawling. It was Clyde's hand which helped him up.

"Hurt, Ho?" the big detective whispered, anxiously.

"No. Where is she?"

"You almost fell over her. Shall I turn on the flash?"

"I see her now." Stooping, Humberton had seen a darker place at his feet. He knelt, and carefully put out both hands. "No light yet, Clyde. But I may need it in a minute."

"I think she's dead," the detective whispered, solemnly.

Humberton made no comment. His uncannily nimble fingers were busy in the darkness. Minutes went by before he stood up again, reached for Clyde, and drew him close.

"Your gun. Have it in your hand."

"It's there right now, Ho. If I see a light, I shoot."

"You felt the arrow, Clyde?"

"I felt it all right," the detective answered. "Plumb through her heart! This Wendigo fellow may be out-of-date with a bow-and-arrow instead of a gun, but he's sure got a flashlight attachment on his bow! He must be close around here. Wonder why he don't try to pot us?"

"Because you are armed."

"You mean he's someone that knows us?"

But again Humberton did not answer. He was peering up at the gray sky, as well as his near-sighted eyes would permit. "Clyde!" he said, abruptly.

"Yes, Ho?"

"Look about you. This may be the reason the poor creature was shot. Aren't we in some sort of clearing?"

"I believe we are, at that," the detective said, slowly.

"Then there may be a house."

"Not here. Nobody lives here. They're all scared to death of it."

"If there is a house, Mary was shot because she came too close to finding it," Humberton continued, doggedly. "Watch on all sides, Clyde. When you see a light, shoot!"

There was a guttural exclamation at their feet.

"Ah!" Instantly, Humberton was on his knees. "How are you feeling, Mary?" he asked, tenderly.

"Me all right," was the terse reply.

"I thought you said she was killed!" Clyde's voice was little above a whisper, but there was marked annoyance in it.

"*You* said so," his friend retorted, calmly. "It was a shoulder wound—inches away from the heart. No doubt she stunned herself in falling. Your bullet must have disturbed his aim, Clyde, but I fear you were excited when you examined Mary. You can walk alone, Mary?"

"Sure!" Mary was evidently on her feet.

"With an arrow in her?" Clyde objected.

"The arrow is out. Can you go back to the Falls and bring help, Mary?"

"Sure!"

"But—Ho—"

"She is an Indian," said the necrologist. "I cut out the arrow in the dark, and bound her up with pieces from my shirt while you stood by. She will get back without difficulty. Get Doctor Rousseau, Mary—and have him look at you first of all."

"Sure!" said Mary, for the third time; and Humberton brought his lips close to Clyde once more.

"She will be quite safe, Clyde, as long as she is going *away* from here. Now, suppose you try to walk across this clearing, while I follow?"

CLYDE snorted. It was his comment on the highly irritating manner in which his friend sometimes ignored him. But, having snorted, Clyde did as he was told. He strode steadily across the cleared space, so oddly there in the midst of the forbidden forest. He placed his feet carefully. Despite his size, his steps were barely audible to Humberton, who followed.

Clyde stopped. His voice was trembling with excitement. "You're right, Ho!" he said. "There's a house dead ahead. All dark. See it?"

Humberton tried to force his eyes behind their thick glasses to more than they could do, but soon shook his head.

"Get closer. Grab my hand—my left. I'm holding the gun in my right."

"I see it," said Humberton, after a few more steps.

He could make out a dark shape against the sky; to his sight it was black and dim.

"Shall we keep going, Ho?"

"We must enter that house," Humberton declared, firmly.

"Stay back of me a little. We're too good a mark if he turns on his light."

Humberton dropped back. But he rejoined Clyde a moment later, beside the house. Against its dark bulk, they seemed reasonably safe.

"I don't know how well you can see it, Ho, but it's a log cabin," the detective whispered. "A big one—two stories. No windows on this side. Let's work our way around to the end."

"Keep watching," Humberton cautioned.

"Don't worry. If he switches on that light there'll be a dead Wendigo!"

Clyde peered cautiously around the corner of the house, then swiftly stepped around it. He kept his back to it as he did so, and scanned the dark circle of trees at the edge of the clearing.

"I'd like to sweep those trees with my own light, but that would be giving him something to shoot at," he said. "Guess

this is the front, Ho. There's the door. Wait a minute."

He pushed at it; and laughed, quietly. "I thought so. Hard to tell in this darkness. It ain't locked, Ho. It's ajar. I'm going to take a little peek inside."

He was back almost at once.

"Ho! Come and listen. There's a queer noise in the house. I can't figure it out."

Humberton leaned against the door sill and listened. There were no front steps. Then he pushed the door open a little farther and stepped carefully inside. Beyond was a well of blackness. Out of it came a low, choked, whimpering sound. Humberton placed his lips against the detective's ear.

"This time, I go first. My ears are better than yours."

He did not wait for Clyde's reply. Almost before he finished speaking, he began to feel his way, with infinite caution, toward the queer sound. He could sense Clyde, close behind. The sound continued, stopping, starting.

Humberton's hand, outstretched like a blind man's, touched rough boards, going up at an angle. He felt them swiftly. "Stairs!" he whispered to Clyde. "I think the sound comes from above. Have your flashlight ready."

The stairs were hardly more than a ladder. Humberton paused on each step, listening and feeling about him. Before reaching the top he knew it was merely a hole in the upper floor from which the rough staircase descended.

He stepped upon that floor. The sound was near. It seemed to come from the left. He turned in that direction, walking with a crouch, his hands close to the floor. In a moment he touched the body of a man. "Your light, Clyde."

He flashed it, but shut it off again instantly. The man was bound and gagged —and living. Humberton's strong, deft fingers worked at the knot which held the gag. He needed no light for that. When he had torn it loose, he turned the flash on once more, for a second or two.

Clyde was looking over his shoulder; and the big detective's amazement was so great that he completely forgot to whisper. His deep voice rumbled like a fog horn.

"Well, I'll be a—" He hesitated for words, but found nothing he might possibly be which could describe his feelings. "It's the red-headed lumber salesman we met on the train!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Terror by Night

THE red-headed man sat up. His face was streaked with dirt, and bloody. Yet he was smiling.

"Hello! Still think I'm a lumber salesman?" he asked, while Humberton was cutting him loose.

"Your knowledge of lumber struck me as a little vague, Joyce, but after all that was none of my business," the necrologist answered.

"It is now. You've made it your business—lucky for me you did!" He looked at Clyde. "Keep that gun in your hand. And get back from the stairhead so you won't be in line from below. He's sure death with a bow-and-arrow."

"Who?" demanded Humberton.

"They call him Lorange—and he's a dangerous baby. He's been one of those African big-game hunters with bows-and-arrows. Up here, on the excuse of long hunting trips, he's been running a queer-money plant."

"Lorange! A counterfeiter! In this house?" Clyde asked, with keen interest.

"You said it. But for Bascom's tip we might never have got him."

"You are sure you've got him now?" Humberton inquired, mildly; and the red-headed man grinned.

"Looks more like he'd got me, eh?

Maybe he has. And maybe I'd have done better to take you fellows into my confidence on the train. But we don't open up very easy in the Service. I wasn't sure whether Bascom was coaxing you up here to help in this, or just for a vacation as he'd told you. I never will be sure—now."

"Then you know—" Humberton began.

Joyce stood up, with a suppressed groan. "I'm stiff. Been tied up here since seven o'clock. He sneaked in and knocked me on the head from behind while I was looking over his plant. Clever, wasn't I? I got off the train farther up and walked back. It's a wild place but I know it well—used to be a boy here. Yes, I know about Bascom's death. Lorange told me. He was keeping me for a possible hostage, with the ultimate idea of killing me, but he couldn't help boasting a little. He shot Bascom with an arrow then carried the body a ways and impaled it through the arrow hole. Something else—he seemed unwilling to tell me what—mutilated the body afterward, but—"

He stopped talking, abruptly. At the same instant, Clyde shut off his flashlight. There were footsteps outside.

THEY stopped near the front door, then went around the cabin at a kind of dog-trot. It could not have been very tightly built, for they were audible all the while. Again they reached the door. There was the *plop* of a catlike leap. They were inside, running about the lower floor. While the three men above listened intently, the footfalls paused somewhere near the base of the stairs, as if the intruder too was listening. Then suddenly they were out of the door with a great jump and off at the run.

"Some kind of an animal," Clyde suggested, in a whisper.

Joyce answered. The bouyancy was gone from his voice. "I don't know just what it is," he said. "But it's no animal. Call it the 'Wendigo,' if you want. You may be nearer right than you think. Whatever it is, Lorange is afraid of it. He was listening for it all the time he was talking to me—"

"There it is again," Clyde whispered.

"No!" Humberton replied. "That's another step."

The government man said, excitedly: "I think you're right. It's more regular."

"More like a human being," Clyde suggested. "It's running! It's running here!"

Suddenly a man's voice filled the cabin. In the tortured frenzy of its scream it would have seemed animal rather than human but for the words. They were hurled forth while the one who screamed fled past the open door.

"Humberton!" they implored—and merged into a high-pitched moan of terror accompanying the running footsteps as they flew on into the woods.

"Come on!" Joyce snapped. "That was Lorange. The thing's after him!"

Humberton was nearest the ladder. He had reached the bottom with the others close behind, when the other footsteps padded past. They were running silently, except for a low, whimpering growl.

Joyce barked another order. "I'll lead. I know the woods. Thank the Lord, the dawn's here. Now we can see something."

But they could see little at first. It was only a gray uncertain light.

"Got a gun?" Clyde asked Joyce.

"Lorange took it. Have yours ready."

He ran straight for a place where the rustling line of trees seemed to open a little.

They plunged into the forest. Here the growth was less dense than by the way they had come. The path they were on—for it was a path—was worn deep into the soil.

"Watch out!" Joyce called, sharply.

But the warning was not needed—even

for the near-sighted Humberton. For the sudden view of desperately struggling, vague figures in the dimness ahead had been accompanied by sounds—a guttural, rasping growl mingled with nightmare-like shrieks. The shrieks stopped and the growl changed to a deep-throated laugh; and as the light of dawn rapidly became brighter, the laughing figure flung the other aside, kicked it with his bare foot, and came to meet them.

"Bascom!" Joyce shouted the name, in an hysterical travesty of his usual voice.

FORTUNATELY for Humberton, he could not see the face clearly. He saw only that it appeared to be the countenance he had last looked at in a coffin. But Clyde saw, and with a sob of terror raised his revolver to fire.

"Don't shoot, Clyde," Humberton commanded. "He has not attacked us yet."

The dreadful thing came on. His hair was snow-white and long. His eyes danced with mad laughter. His mouth slobbered blood. His arms were outstretched, with twitching, hungry fingers. And his face was like Bascom's.

He came within a dozen feet of them. There he stopped. For an instant, the laugh left his dreadful features, as if someone had wiped it off. It was succeeded by a grimace of pain. He plucked at his breast, and with both hands tore out an arrow. As he broke it into two pieces and threw it to the ground, the laugh returned to his face. But now it was no longer a silent laugh. He gurgled and shrieked with laughter—laughter that came forth in blood from his mouth, and oozed bloodily to trickle down his breast and bedraggle the tattered skins he wore —until, with a last chuckle, he slumped to the ground.

"I get it, Ho!" Clyde forgot the mad horror of that death scene in the idea that came to him. "Bench told me Bascom had a brother and the devil carried him off. He must have gone loony and taken to the woods. He's the Wendigo—the thing that's been tearing the hearts out of animals. I'll bet he climbed to the girl's window, bloodied up her bed with his hands and frightened her into a fit, then stole Bascom's body. We'll find it somewhere around."

Humberton had already walked up the path to the place where Lorange lay, with his head horribly twisted to one side. He merely hesitated there, and went on. In a moment, he called back to the other two. "Here is a cave. I see something inside."

Before they joined him, he had completed his brief examination and emerged from the cave. He spoke slowly.

"He is still wearing the funeral shoes. They are muddy at the back where they swept the ground when his brother eased the body out of the window and leapt clear of the muddy spot himself. I think, gentlemen, Lorange used this poor, mad creature to terrorize the countryside and help preserve his own secret."

"I'd say it was Lorange himself killed Bench's dog," Clyde put in. "Then he gouged it up to throw some more Wendigo scare into us."

"No doubt. He was an ingenious man. Even the mutilation and theft of the body may have been part of his plan, though it seems more like a maniac's idea." He looked sadly at Lorange's huddled figure. "We shall never know that, I suppose. All we know is that at the last his monster got out of hand and turned against him."

The government agent nodded.

As they turned to leave, he glanced back into the cave. Something lay on the ground, near the entrance. He picked it up. It was a great bow, broken into four pieces, with a small flashlight still bolted near the middle.

The Faceless Horror

By J. J. Des Ormeaux

From the time the skull-faced man took Chung for his last ride until the D. A.'s op met murder in that empty house a horror pall hung over the city. For crimeland was cashing in its pay-checks that night. And no man knew where the next danger dollar would be earned.



His face was like a skull.

CHAPTER ONE

Chung

TOM CHUNG was very nervous. He kept wiping his yellow hands together and his flat face with its sprinkling of pock-marks around the nose glistened with an oily sheen.

"I ask you to come here, Mr. Carroll," he said, and his usually fluent English kept running together as though he had a mouthful of water, "because I have information I wish to give you."

"Good," I said. Information from Chung might be interesting. One of those characters who live along the borderline

between the underworld and respectability, sliding from one side to the other with considerable agility, I was sure he had a hand in many things that bore no more trace of him than water bears when a fish slips through it.

"This is something I do not take to the police," he said. "I cannot take to the police." He wiped his forehead. "So I think if I give it to you, who are of the district attorney's office, you can protect me."

"Protect you," I said. "Do you need protection?"

"I am likely to die," he said, and his eyes jumped into the corners of the ill-lit room as though he thought there might be something in the shadows there.

"At whose hands?"

"Someone on the police."

"Oh," I said. "Playing in somebody's back yard, eh?"

"I do nothing," he said. In his nervousness he shot it back like one word. He stopped and got a better purchase on his lips. "All I do is stumble on information. I cannot help that. Once I have it I have no way to get rid of it. What can I do, Mr. Carroll?" He spread out his hands and they trembled. "I have no place to go. So I think if I tell you, you see nothing happens to Chung."

I SUPPOSE I must have sat there giving him a full stare, because his eyes suddenly ran away from mine to his hands clasped together upon the table and he made swallowing motions in his throat. It was a marvel to me to see the imperturbable Chung, usually inscrutable as a stone, wrought up this way. I thought it must be something pretty potent that could work such a panic in him.

I knocked ashes into the cracked bowl between us.

"I've heard rumors of a little traffic in poppy gum," I said. "If the police haven't got that on your tail, we'll protect you."

He let out considerable breath. "No, no," he said. He hunched forward. "It is"—he reached out and adjusted the bowl so that the crack would be away from both of us—"it is about someone high on the police. He is being blackmailed."

"Blackmailed," I said.

"Try to blackmail," he said, and shot his eyes up at me and down at the bowl again. "A man and a girl. This police officer has taken big protection money. These two hold over him the checks he has taken for the money."

"What?" I said. "These two hold over him the checks he has taken? How could that be? How could they get hold of the checks?"

"I tell you how it happen," he said. "There was a big racket here. Gambling. Also, you know, houses. Also lotteries. Very big. There was one man who run it all. He"—he waved his head—"he in Cuba now."

"Oh," I said. "Art Halstead." The smell of that hadn't got out of the city yet. What Art Halsted must have cleaned up on could have been nothing short of three quarters of a million dollars. And when he cut out he turned loose on the city a flood of dips, crooks and prostitutes that we hadn't even started to make headway against.

"Art Halsted have a girl he live with," said Chung. "One day they have big row. Girl run out with strongbox she think have money in it. But when she get box open she find inside nothing but bank statements and canceled checks."

My eyes widened. "Oh," I said.

"You see," he said. "Among checks are those Art Halsted have paid police officers. Police officers have signed on back, have taken to bank, bank have paid, bank have sent back to Art Halsted. This evidence. Girl not know value of this.

She going to throw all away, being very angry. But then man gets hold of her who does. He make plan. Girl go police officer, tell him he pay big sum, or checks be turned over to newspapers. Because much excitement lately over Art Halsted, be sensation. And they know police officer can pay much money because checks are so big."

I thought of how the papers would scream. I whistled to myself. I thought: China boy, this is something big. To dissemble the interest that was crowding out all over me I made some business about getting into my pocket for a pencil.

"All right," I said. I laid my cigarette on the edge of the table. "Now let's put some names to this. Who is the police officer?"

He had his hands locked together and he squeezed them. "I do not know," he said.

We had a little battle of silence then while I tried to get hold of his eyes and he kept them fixed on his thumbs. The thumbs were inside his fists.

I made short scratches, with the blunt end of the pencil on the paper. "Who are the two blackmailers?" I said.

"That I can give you," he said. "That I do know. The girl's name is Sally Davenant. She lives over on Courtney Street. I give you her address."

He gave it. I wrote it down.

"The man's name is Weiss," he said. "I do not know his first name. I think he is hiding from something. But I know where."

HE gave me a second address. I wrote it under the first one. Then I lit a fresh cigarette, smudged out the old one in the bowl, and blew a gust of smoke toward the weak bulb overhead where a moth was battering around.

"How do you happen to know all this, Chung?" I said.

"I stumble on it. In—ah—in a business way."

"Peddling hop to the two of them?"

"No, no. I tell you I do not do that."

"Who is the police officer?"

"I do not know." He shook his head many times rapidly.

"Just what is it makes you so afraid?"

"That I know this. I am afraid from both sides. But mostly from side of police officer. He have most to lose. He powerful. He maybe have others with him. Chung nothing. Easy to remove."

"You're not so afraid from the other side."

"No. Not so much."

"But they both know you have this knowledge?"

"Yes."

"You've been warned?"

"Ah"—his eyes scurried around the table—"no."

"By no one?"

"No."

"Who is the police officer?"

"I tell you I do not know!" His voice rose to a falsetto.

"You do know," I said. "You've had a finger in this, Chung."

"No, no!"

"You've had a finger in it and you're scared and you want to pull out," I said.

"No, no!" His jaw worked like a trap-lid when he said it.

"The three of you tried it and it didn't work," I said. "You've been threatened. You've tried to get your pals not to turn the letters over to the newspapers but they won't listen to you. So you think if you give the two of them in you can save yourself that way."

He stood up. His chair skidded backwards. The sheen on his face had collected into little beads.

"It is wrong!" he said. "I am not in it!"

"That's all right," I said. "Don't get

excited. It's going to work fine. Just as you planned it. Only you've got to give me the name of the police officer. That's what I've got to have."

He stood there with his knees bent and his flat face thrust forward. But in the backs of his dilated eyes were the beginnings of reflection. There was a knock at the door.

"Why, don't you see," I said, "the only way for you to be safe is to let us get him before he tries anything? Don't be a fool. You're playing into his hands."

Chung was not looking at me. He was looking at the door. His eyes sprang back to me with a new animation in them.

"You'd better let me get that," I said.

He made a gesture toward me, turned toward the door. "Who is it?" he called.

A voice said something incomprehensible to me.

"It's all right," said Chung. "A friend. One moment."

He went to the door. I tilted my chair around and leaned back so that I was partly in the shadow. Through the narrow aperture over Chung's round shoulders I caught a glimpse of one of the strangest faces I have ever seen. It was like a skull. The skin was shrunken tight around the nose and teeth and there were pits under the cheek-bones you could have thrust your knuckles into. The whole thing was the color of lettuce that has grown in a cellar.

Chung stepped out into the hall, intoning something in a querulous way. The door slammed. It did not close, it slammed, as though someone had kicked it with his foot. I jumped up. Chung called "Oh! What—" There was a scuffling sound. Chung screamed.

I jumped for the door. It was wedged shut; something long like a chair had been propped under the knob. I threw my weight against it; it bucked me back.

Confused sounds were going down the corridor. Hurryings. Stumblings. No cries. Then Chung's voice called muffledly from further down: "Help! Help! Carroll!"

I turned and ran across the room through the dark bedroom looking for a back door. There was none. I came back and caught up a chair. I smashed it from overhead into the center panel of the door.

The wood split in a great irregular oblong and parts of the chair shot out into the hall. I reached through and hooked away the prop under the knob. It was a crutch.

The hall was empty. I raced down its dark tunnel toward the front of the house. Yellow and brown faces popped out from doorways and yanked back behind slammed doors as I went. I vaulted down the flight of stairs that led out. The swinging doors saying *Elk Hotel* were still quivering.

The street was deserted. There was a stink of unburnt gasoline in the air and at the end of the block a tail-light was just swinging right. The front left tire of my own car was neatly sliced through.

I ran at two Filipino faces that were sticking out from the dark hole of an entrance-way. They disappeared and the passage was as empty as a conjurer's hat by the time I reached its mouth. Other shapes were on the sidewalk when I turned around. When I started for them they scuttled into the darkness like rats.

The friend of one China boy had done a little crossing up.

Tom Chung had gone for a ride.

CHAPTER TWO

The Red Room

I KNEW it was useless, but I ran around a street or two in the general direction the car might have taken. I suppose my body was just working off steam. Two

blocks down was South Grand, the lower edge of the downtown district where there was a stream of night traffic. It was like hunting for a particular chip in a sawmill. On South Grand I flagged a cab. There was only one thing to do, and that was to get to the other two members of the triangle as fast as possible. I gave the driver Weiss's address.

It was a dingy rooming-house set back between two dark factories that smelled of hides. The man who answered the bell marked *Office* carried his head on one shoulder and turned his whole body around when he pointed to the stairs. I went up them.

The second floor had one bulb burning over the stairway that left both ends of the hall in darkness. I looked at the numbers on the doors and went toward the back end. As I passed the door marked bathroom a noise of retching was coming out.

The door I wanted was the last one down. It was open; light came through it. I stepped into the opening and saw a bare room with an iron bed and a rumpled gray spread over it. Nobody there. On the washstand beside the water pitcher a cigarette was burning.

As I stepped back into the hall a man was coming down it; he had come out of the bathroom. His face was gray. His shoulders were carried forward and he was opening and closing his mouth. Black hair hung down over his eyes in two lank wings and was shoved up behind as though he had been sleeping on it. He might have been powerful in a chunky way but it was all out of him now. His knees splayed sideways as he walked.

He was coming toward the room. He looked at me and stopped, took two steps backward and started to turn around. His muscles didn't seem to track.

I took half a dozen long steps and had him by the shoulder. As I turned him around with my right hand I slapped him around the hips and chest with my left. "Weiss?" I said.

He tossed the hair out of his eyes and looked at me with his head tilted back, saying, "What the hell do you want?"

I showed him a badge, said, "Come in here," and steered him toward his room.

He made no protest. He did nothing, just leaned on me. Inside the room he sat down on the bed with his hands hanging between his knees and looked at the floor. I closed the door and put the cigarette out.

"Now, boy," I said, "we've got you for blackmailing. Who's the one you and Davenant are trying to milk?"

He put his head back and made an effort to look at me. "What?" he said.

"Who's the police officer you're blackmailing?" I said.

He had me in focus and held it with his head cocked back. He had one of those sullen faces that go with people habitually taciturn, whose normal expression is a scowl. His voice matched it. "What blackmailing?" he said.

I reached out and kicked the side of his foot. "Don't take that line," I said. "We've got you, boy. If you want to dodge the spot it's time to flop over. Who is it you're holding the checks on?"

"I don't know a thing about it," he said.

"Where are Art Halsted's checks?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

I reached out and put my hand around the back of his neck. I waggled his head, thrusting my fingers in the pits behind his ears.

"Listen," I said. "Chung's been ridden out tonight. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Chung?" he said. His eyelids lifted further over the pupils than they had this

far. He seemed to be trying to struggle up to a sense of the situation.

"You're next in line," I said. "Talk. We don't want you. We want the copper. Who is he?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Who's the guy with the face like a skull?"

"I don't know," he said. He closed his eyes.

I got up. "Get your coat," I said. "I'll take you to Davenant and we'll see what kind of a duet you sing together."

HE came peaceably enough. Inside the cab he slumped in one corner and let his head roll with the motion of the seat. He kept his eyes closed. From time to time he mopped his face with a handkerchief he had pulled out of his coat pocket. About halfway there he suddenly sat up stiffly, got hold of the edge of the seat with both hands, and began taking long breaths through a mouth that had a ring of white around it. I thought he was going to faint. He threw his head forward between his knees so the blood would run to it and came out of it himself.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I said.

"Nothing."

The Davenant address was a two-flat building at the end of a spur of blind street. It had a lot of big trees around it. Kind of pretty and rural. There was a light upstairs. The flat downstairs was dark and had a sign in the window saying *To Let—Furnished.*

I paid off the driver and took Weiss up the stairs with one hand under the pit of his arm. He was not so flabby now. The air seemed to have done him some good. In the hall I rang the bell that corresponded to the upstairs flat. There was no answer.

"We'll go up," I said.

We went up the flight of stairs and he leaned against the wall paper while I knocked at the door. No one came. I listened. There was no noise.

"Have you got a key?" I asked.

"No," he said.

I went over him. He had none.

"We'll go around the back," I said.

I steered him down and out around the lawn to the rear. There were no fences. We climbed the stairs. On the top step an empty cream-bottle rolled away from our feet over the porch floor. The kitchen was lighted behind shades; the door was slightly open. We went in.

There were two bedrooms opening off the hall and both were dark. At the end of the hall, light was coming from the living room. We went down to it.

It was done in various shades of red that some tastes might have found pleasing. The wallpaper had a small red figure. The hangings at the windows were wine-colored; there was a heavier hanging at the back of maroon. In the rug deep crimson predominated. The furniture was of smooth red leather. Over the end of the sofa the body of a girl was lying.

I said to Weiss: "Sit down in that chair."

He didn't seem to hear me at first; he was looking at the girl. When I took hold of him he swung a pair of glassy black eyes on me and half shambled and half fell into an armchair. An inarticulate noise came from his mouth.

I went over to the girl. She had been throttled. She was lying with her head back over the arm of the sofa and her face from chin to mouth was lead-colored. From there up to the roots of her hair it was black. The lips were back from her teeth and her eyeballs protruded. There were green bruises on her throat. Her body was twisted back and to one side so that the pressure on her shoulder had torn the light stuff of her dress.

Whoever had done it had stood over her and forced her body down with one knee while he pushed her head back over the arm of the sofa. The edge of one seat cushion was kicked up. She hadn't struggled much. She didn't look very strong.

I stepped across the room to the telephone by the hall door and called Nate Wycherley of my own office—then central police headquarters. While I phoned I kicked the door shut and turned so I could keep one eye on Weiss. He was sitting forward with his eyes fixed on the girl and his breath was coming shortly through his open mouth. All at once he got up in a jerky fashion and walked toward her. I put one hand over the mouthpiece and said: "Get back there." He stopped, but he did no go back; he stood staring at her in the unnatural pose of a somnambulist. Right there I began to wish I had bracelets with me. This boy was coming to.

When I hung up the receiver I went over and took him with one hand by the clothes on the chest. I shook his face into mine and shoving one thumb at the girl said: "Davenant?"

He nodded.

"Who did it?" I said.

"I don't know."

"You do know," I said, and shook him again, more vigorously. He swiveled around and fell away from me toward the sofa; the fly of his shirt ripped and he jounced down beside the girl. He rolled his eyes at her and scrambled up again, unseating one cushion under her as he did so. But for that I might not have seen the piece of check. It was under her dress and wafted down into the hole.

I GOT hold of Weiss with one hand while I picked it up. It was part of that side where the number, date and signature are usually written. The amount was there in bold figures—$8000. So was part of the line that had been drawn after the no/100. Above that was the final upstroke of the name of the person to whom it had been drawn. Of the signature there was only the top of a looped letter. The bank's number and three letters of its name remained—GHT. It was roughly moon-shaped and crumpled as though it had been torn from between her thumb and fingers.

I pulled Weiss to me and shoved it under his nose. "Whose is this?" I said.

He stared at it and reached one hand up toward it, said thickly: "I don't know."

"It's one of the canceled checks you were using," I said. "He's got the rest. Who is it?"

He shook his head. It suddenly occurred to me that the rest of the check might be there somewhere and I started to turn over the cushions with my free hand. Then the lights went out.

It was so sudden my mind seemed to blink instead of my eyes. One second the room was there around us and the next we were in absolute blackness.

We both stood there just as we were; I with one hand still out toward the seat of the sofa.

In the complete quiet a small sound came from the direction of the back porch. Someone had unscrewed the electric-light fuses from the fuse-box. He was coming in.

I turned around with one silent movement, changing hands on Weiss. I dropped the check in my pocket and slid my right hand back for my gun. Weiss turned his torso without moving his feet. The muscles of his back were rigid.

I lifted my hand and touched the cold muzzle of the gun against his neck. That was to tell him certain things my voice could not. I twisted my hand in his coat and drew the gun across my body to my hip. Weiss changed his feet on the rug.

The noises had entered the hall. They

were moving steathily, softly, the soft friction of toes on carpet. The door between us was closed, but underneath it a pale glimmering came once and snatched away. He had a flashlight.

Was he coming back for the piece of check?

We were both breathing heavily. Weiss's back against my hand moved like part of a bellows. The feet came rapidly, but their whole course seemed to take an age. *Slip, slip, slip.* A hand took hold of the hall-door knob.

Weiss shouted like a maniac and leaped diagonally into the dark. I sprang forward with everything I had in me but I was late; my muscles had to take the shock and then recover. Something crashed at me and hit my knee as it came down in stride. Weiss had used the end table. Its legs hooked my foot going up and tripped me. I went down on my face. The room was a racket. Ten men might have been in it. I was using my knees for feet and trying to make the hall door. I threw out one hand and hit it; it banged open; Weiss was going out the front. I couldn't stop him. I had made my choice: I managed to get to my feet and went down the hall like a juggernaut.

At such times it's easy to make the wrong play. If I had gone for Weiss no doubt I could have caught him; he was in no shape to run far. And Weiss knew the situation; a little elbow grease would have got it out of him. The other one was an unknown quantity and had a minute or two headstart. A minute or two at such times is as good as a lifetime. But the whole set of my body was that way and wild horses couldn't have turned me. I wanted the man who had come in. Weiss hardly seemed to exist.

I SWUNG into the kitchen and dove at the back porch. There was something on the threshold—a hat. My mind gave something like a cry of joy even in the split second I shot by it. I had that anyway. I got down to the ground the quickest I knew how: I slid down the banister to the landing, swung my legs over, and let go at the lawn below. When I hit the ground I saw my friend had gone me one better. The marks showed where he had jumped from the porch.

The lawn was long here and the trees were far back. In the darkness between them something was disappearing. A back—a broad back. That was all I saw, just a flash of wide shoulder-blades and then nothing. There were about fifty yards between us and my gun was somewhere on the living-room floor. I dug my feet in and raced.

I didn't know what lay behind the screen of trees. My knowledge of the geography was confined to the front of the house. I found out when I hit it. A row of trees in pots that marked out the end of a nursery. I made a hole in the row while crockery clattered and the trees slashed me like arms. My hands stubbed themselves against the wall of a greenhouse. From the right somewhere came the noise of a car starting.

I turned and ran around the greenhouse in that direction. Nothing but darkness. The sound seemed to come from my left now. I put my head down and ran at something black, felt my head in a hedge, used my arms like a swimmer's and fought through. An open space was before me and something was ploughing through the other end. A dark mass in darkness. I plunged that way, thrashed through weeds, saw the mass buck up over the sidewalk and swing into the street. A coupe—I got that glimpse of it and it was around the corner.

There was another sound in the air. A car was coming up the spur of street toward the house. I could see its lights flash through the trees. I made for it

with every ounce I had. I yelled, made hoarse noises. I tripped over roots, dead branches, bumped against trees. It had pulled up before the house now and I could not see it. As I came across the stretch of lawn I could hear the sound of a door slamming. I kept on around the side and caught the driver as he started up the front stairs. It was Wycherley.

I had no breath to talk, so I pointed. He got me by the arm and said: "Chuck! What's the matter! What's the matter!" I don't know what I got out. We ran back to the car.

We shot around the block and picked up the place where the coupe had turned into the street. We headed right, turned the corner, drove in ever widening circles. For fifteen minutes we honeycombed the neighborhood. After the first five I knew we were beaten—he had gotten away. We picked up only one car—a coupe with a young couple in it. They had seen nothing—they would have seen nothing.

CHAPTER THREE

Two-Spotted Hat

WHEN we got back to the spur of street the police had come. They had been there but a few minutes; the chauffeur was still turning the car around at the blind end of the road. Upstairs men were knocking around with flashlights. We ran up the back stairs and I fetched up short on the porch.

The hat was gone.

I ran inside. Three or four men were in the living room with their lights on the girl.

"Who's got that hat?" I said.

They turned. Somebody said: "What hat?"

"Didn't one of you pick up a hat in the back doorway?"

"Not me." There was a chorus of grunts.

From behind me Wycherley flashed his light around the faces. There was Walsh, deputy chief of detectives; Morgan, a sergeant; Green, another sergeant; Rigali, a lieutenant; and a patrolman I did not know.

"Who else is here?" I said.

"We're all," said Walsh. "What's the matter? Did you lose something?"

I didn't answer, but said: "Let's get some lights," and pulled Wycherley with me down the hall. In the kitchen I said into his ear: "Listen. Some one of those birds has got rid of that. Don't tell me the guy came back and got it himself. Or that Weiss did. Keep an eye on them while I get some fuses in the box."

He nodded, handed me his light, and started down the hall. On the back porch I found the fuses had all been punctured. I ran downstairs to look in the first-floor box. I found three there. As I unscrewed them I tucked the light under my arm. I was thinking: suppose one of them got out to the porch first, spotted the hat, recognized it. What would he do? He wouldn't have time to do much. A hat it pretty bulky to try to hide in a coat pocket. Hard to keep under your arm. What would he do? Depends on how bright he was—or how rushed. Toss it? It's possible. The ray of my light was flickering in the areaway. That gave me an idea. I leaned over the rail and shot the light around it. I saw something black.

I got down there in two jumps. It was the hat. Whoever had done it had simply picked it up and dropped it over the side. That meant he hadn't had much time. That meant some of them were honest. That meant he would have to come down afterward and get it.

I was going over it carefully with the light. It was a gray Stetson fedora, good felt, dented in the ordinary way. In the ridge of the crown were two spots close

together, as though someone had spilled something on it. Inside were no initials —either pasted or punched; no retailer's name. In short, nothing by which to trace the owner in any way at all. There were probably two thousand hats like it in the city.

I stood there with it in my hands scowling. This was queer. Whoever had recognized it must have known it by the spots on the crown. Except for that it might have been any hat in the world. If he looked at it at all he must have known there was no way to trace it. Yet he had pitched it out. But the stranger thing was that he had recognized it by the spots. They were inside the dent, where no one ordinarily could have seen them when it was being worn. That meant a pretty close acquaintance with the hat. You can be with a man for six months and not know his hat when you see it. A very close acquaintance—almost as though it were his own.

THIS was a steep one. In any case, he would have to come down for it. Dropping it there was only preliminary to getting it away. Should I wait? Should I try to catch him when he came down? How much chance did I have? How much chance would he take? What other way was there of getting him? As I stood there turning it over in my mind I started all at once. Somebody was calling me from above—not loudly.

"Carroll! Carroll!"

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. It wasn't Wycherley. A heavier voice, with a hint of anxiety in it—either Rigali or Walsh. Somebody was nervous because I had gone out the back way and stayed so long.

I took a soft step backward and stood in the cellar doorway. I reached out and slid my own hat over the floor where the other had been. The voice was still saying "Carroll!" more softly. It was alone. Feet started down the stairs, stopping often. He was looking around for me.

The feet all at once began to run and ran all the way down to the lower porch without stopping. They came rapidly around the turn and ran down to the sidewalk. A dark shape darted into the areaway and picked up the hat.

I dove straight out and lit on his shoulders.

He went down in a heap, not saying anything, but kicking and smashing at me from underneath. He was a heavy man but there wasn't much force in his blows. I had only one intention: to get the gun from his hip before he was in a position to get it himself. I took a crack or two while I got hold of the butt and slung the gun out across the areaway. Then I jumped back and shoved him at the wall, reaching for the flashlight. I wasn't interested in brawling. I wanted to know who it was.

It was Walsh. He crouched against the wall and where his heavy cheeks sagged over the ends of his mouth two lines drew down that showed the bottoms of his teeth. He was a man going on sixty and his face was a peculiar mottled color, white and dull red. Under his bushy eyebrows his eyes burned like an animal's.

I took one step to where I could reach the gun. "So it was you threw that over," I said.

He didn't move; he didn't say anything. His breath made a harsh sound. Beneath the circle of light his elbows began to work.

"I always thought you were on the up-and-up, Walsh," I said. "So you're the one mixed up with that Halsted racket."

He moved his tongue over his lips with difficulty. His eyes were fixed on mine and they did not blink. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Are you going to talk to me or shall I call the boys down?" I said.

Our voices were both low. His was hardly louder than his breathing.

"What do you think you've got on me?" he asked. The elbows were still working.

"A lot, commencing with a hat."

"You'll never get that hat," he said.

"Oh, no?" I said. "Is that the tone you're going to take?"

His eyes were narrow. "Call them all down," he said. "Tell them what you like. You'll never see it again. I'll walk out of here with it. They take orders from me."

"You're trying something pretty hard, Walsh," I said.

The veins on his temple stood out like a vine. "I'll get away with it," he said.

"It's too bad you think so," I said. I shifted the light down to his arms. His hands were empty. "Because that's my hat you've just shoved down your arm."

His whole face shook with the jolt. He started to dig one hand in his armpit and stopped himself. His voice was hoarse. "You're a liar," he said.

I DIDN'T swing the light to show him where I had the hat. I kept it on his face. I said: "And what's more, there's another thing I've got."

Where the lines in his face had been the skin hung loose. The splotches on his face were crimson.

"There's a little thing I didn't tell you about that I found upstairs," I said. "By the girl's body. A piece of torn paper—a check."

He hung forward and the breath had stopped in his throat. His eyes bulged; they were shiny, blood-filled, enormous.

I shot the light down to the check in my right hand as I said: "And the name on it is Walsh."

He made a strangled sound that was the beginning of a cry and leaped at me. I had expected something but I had not expected this. I took his whole weight on my chest and staggered back to the wall. I hooked a blind right into him and pulled my punch even as it started. The weight that had fallen on me was that of an insensible man.

I threw out both arms around him and caught him before he slid to the floor. His head fell back as though it were made of lead. His mouth was slightly open; his eyes were closed.

I laid him down on the floor and my own skin was cold and moist. I never wanted to kill anybody that way. I pulled the coat apart from his chest and got my head down to it. There was a flickering there. I drew my first full breath when I heard that. I pulled out my own hat from inside his coat and thrust it under his head. I got up and took the gray fedora and ran upstairs.

Rigali and Green were the first ones I met.

"Walsh has had a stroke," I said. "Looks like a heart attack. We've got to get him in the car to the hospital quick."

"What? What's the matter with him?" asked Rigali. We started down while Green shouted for the others.

"He tumbled over while he was talking to me," I said. "He's down in the areaway."

I said nothing about our conversation, nothing about the hat. I said nothing about anything; I didn't know whom I could trust. I waited until I could get Wycherley alone when the others were carrying Walsh to the car and said to him: "Stick by me. Walsh is it. Come along to the hospital." Then I ran out to the car after the others. Rigali was in charge now. He didn't know quite what to do.

I thrust the three fuses into his hand and said: "You'll want to stay here and hold the place down. Wycherley and I

will take him. We have to go back to the office anyway."

"All right," he said. He seemed relieved. He stood looking at Walsh's gray face while Wycherley and I got in the back seat and supported the inert body between us. The driver was gunning the cold engine. Rigali said, "Fifth Street Emergency," to the driver and gave him the sign to pull out.

We made time. I couldn't talk to Wycherley on account of the way the driver was using the siren, and his freckled face kept being one wide question. I was hoping Walsh would come to before we got there, and kept my eyes close to his face for signs of life. But he stayed limp. I was remembering the bright splotches on his face and wondering how bad this would be. At his time of life a person doesn't take many like that and come back. If he went out before he could talk . . .

The emergency hospital was a few lighted rooms in the rear of a low gray building. A young doctor rolled down off an operating-table yawning and stretching his arms while we carried Walsh through the door. He felt him over and had us carry him in an adjoining room to a cot. I wondered why the doctor didn't use the cot.

When the doctor got through he went out into the other room and picked up the telephone, still yawning. We followed him out and I said: "How bad is it? Is he going to come through?"

The doctor shrugged as he talked to the Christian Hospital. When he hung up he said: "No use your sticking around. He may be a long time like this. He probably wouldn't know you if he did come to."

"Oh," I said. "Then there's no chance of talking to him?"

"Not tonight," he said.

He went over and got a syringe out of a glass case and went into the other room. I said to the driver: "You may as well go back, Biggs. We'll probably stay here a while and see."

Biggs said, "O. K.," and went out.

I SAT down in a chair. Wycherley sat on an edge of the doctor's desk beside me. The doctor was whistling in the other room. I gave Wycherley the whole situation, painstakingly. He listened with an acute look on his homely face.

I showed him the exhibits. He looked them over with his lips pursed blowing a soft breath through them. Then he said: "So you think these"—he tapped his hand on the hat—"belong to"— He hooked his thumb at the other room.

"Not the hat," I said. "It's eight and a quarter and I looked at his before they carried him away. His is bigger."

"Then he isn't the one you ran out of the flat."

I shrugged. "Not unless he's a cross between Houdini and an eagle, and did a flip across town while we were chasing him, and hopped in the police car and came riding back with them."

"Then there's two in it, at least, eh? said Wycherley. "Walsh and this one who ran out. Who could he be? Where do you fit him in?"

"I don't," I said. "I can't. Unless he was someone put up to going in after the check."

"You don't think he could have been somebody else high up? Somebody who might have done it? Somebody Walsh might be trying to cover?"

I said: "Anything's possible. I don't think so because I can't figure a dick doing something like that. Punching the fuses and sneaking in. There's too many other ways."

"Well, hell, he might have lost his head," said Wycherley. "The girl was strangled; that's pretty wild and violent.

You can't figure a dick doing that, either. You can't figure anybody doing it unless he went nuts for a minute."

"You're right," I said. "But still I don't believe it. What you're saying is that Walsh found the hat and recognized it as some brother officer's and shot it over the porch to protect him. In the first place I don't think he could ever recognize the hat. There's nothing he could do it by except the spots, and I'll be damned if I think he had a close enough acquaintance with any brother officer's hat to know it had two little spots on it. In the second place, show me the man who will try so hard to protect a brother officer that he'll stand getting caught at it and then have a stroke when he finds he can't get him off. In the third place he had the stroke when I said the name on the check was Walsh. Try to argue around that."

"I can't," he said. "You win. The check must have been his. But the hat wasn't."

"I know the hat wasn't," I said. "The hell with the hat. Do you know what Walsh was before he was deputy chief of detectives?"

"No."

"Head of the vice squad. That's the one thing that could have done Art Halsted most good."

"You make your case," he said. "The checks were his. I'm not arguing."

"If the checks were his," I said, "then he was the one who was being blackmailed. If he was the one who was being blackmailed then he was the one at the bottom of this. I grant you he had help. I wouldn't be surprised if there were four or five with him. I wouldn't be surprised if the one I chased out of the house was one of those who rode out Chung. But the one at the bottom of this was the one who killed Davenant. If you were there and saw his eyes when I had him cornered in the areaway you'd know I'm not guessing far wrong."

"Put it together for me, Mr. Prosecutor," he said. "I'd like to hear you straighten it all out."

"All right," I said. "I'll give you my version. At least it's simple even if it does cut the corners. Weiss and the girl and Chung had the checks. The thing hadn't been running long; it was all sprung today or this evening. They flashed the checks on Walsh; they told him to fill up the dish. He wouldn't—they got out. Chung called me in because he was scared stiff. Meanwhile Walsh had already got in motion. He got to the girl. I don't know what went on but Walsh was probably in a wild rage. Maybe she tried to tease him. Let him look at the checks or something. He saw spots and strangled her, and got all or part of the checks. Then the covering began. His friends got to Chung but I beat them to Weiss. Walsh discovered part of one check was missing and sent somebody back for it. He knew the house was isolated and there was a pretty good chance. Afterwards he came along himself with the detail from downtown, and when he saw the hat he knew the boy he had sent in must have dropped it. So he slung it over the back porch. He didn't look at it. He didn't recognize it. He simply knew whose it must be."

"I thought when you told me before you said he recognized it by the spots," said Wycherley.

"I'm thinking different now," I said. I reached for the phone. "There's only one thing to do. We've got to check up on Walsh's movements this evening."

I called a cab.

CHAPTER FOUR

It Wasn't Walsh

WE reached central police headquarters in about thirty minutes. On the way Wycherley sat with a far-away

scowl on his face looking alternately at the piece of check and out the cab window. I held my watch in my hand and tried to compute the time sequence with regard to Walsh. It had been approximately half past eight when I had phoned from the Davenant apartment for the police. That meant Walsh had been at police headquarters then. Where he had been earlier in the evening was the vital part. The murder had been committed some little time before I reached the apartment. But not before dark, because the lights were on and the shades were down. It grew dark these days in the neighborhood of seven o'clock. That meant only an hour and a half when Walsh had to be accounted for. Two hours at most.

When we got out of the squeaky elevator on the second floor of the old courthouse the first man we met coming out of the C. I. division was Bledsoe, a lieutenant of Walsh's. I didn't know anything about him beyond his face, which you could take as you liked.

"Where's Walsh been this evening?" I asked.

"He's not here now," he said. "He's out on a run."

"I know," I said. "I mean before he left. Was he around here before that?"

"Why, I guess so," he said. "Yes, sure. He came in from dinner. Why, what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," I said. "Just making a few friendly inquiries. About what time did he come in from dinner?"

"You sound like you're trying to get something on him," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," I said. "Don't take it so hard. Can't a person ask a few questions?"

"As I recall he was in here at seven o'clock," said Bledsoe, and passed on down the hall.

Seven o'clock. If he had been here at seven o'clock he couldn't have committed the murder. Somebody else called to us; the old Negro who had run us up in the elevator was leaning against his door getting an earful of the conversation.

"Yo' speakin' of Captain Walsh," he said. "Ah ran him up heah myself from the street about a quartah to eight. Ah rememba 'count of he's always with Captain Tyburn, an' tonight he was alone. Him an' Captain Tyburn always eats dinna togetha."

We were beside him in three steps. "You ran him up from the street about a quarter to eight?"

"Yes, *suh.*"

"Tyburn's office is right down here," said Wycherley.

We hurried down the hall.

Tyburn was a big man with a cold eye, a mouth like a single line, a curt voice, and a hand like a fish's back. He kept his eyes on us, asked no questions, and said in a clipped tone: "I usually eat dinner with Walsh at Louis Fors'. I didn't go there tonight. Whether Walsh did I can't say."

We got to Louis Fors' as quickly as possible. It was a small grill in the middle of the next block, and Louis himself was helping the waiters stack the chairs. He came forward smiling, jerking his head, and rubbing his hands.

"Did Captain Walsh eat dinner in here tonight?" I said.

"Captain Walsh!" he said, holding up one finger and turning his eyes toward his nose as if he were looking inside his head. "Let me think." He put one hand out upon a table-top.

"Don't think," I said. "Was he here or not? Do you remember him or don't you?"

"Let me see," he said. "Boys!" He turned toward the other waiters. "Was

Captain Walsh in here for dinner tonight?"

One of the waiters, a sour-looking Irishman with a face like a pug's, tossed a chair on a table and said in a surly voice: "I fed him."

"You did?" I said. "What time was that?"

"Beginning at six thirty. I'm on at six thirty. He was the first one I had."

"How long was he here?"

"He had a full dinner. Going up to an hour."

I walked up to him. "You're sure of that?" I said. I looked into his little blue eyes. "You'd swear to that on a witness stand?"

"Huh? he said. His face was vacuous and puzzled. Expression rushed into it suddenly as he knotted his brows and said: "Sure I will." He threw a hand at another waiter. "You seen me, George, didn't you? You seen him, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said the other. "He sat right over there. He was here all right."

I walked up to Wycherley, hooked my arm in his and started for the door. "Thanks, Louis," I said. "Thanks, boys. Come on, you sap. We've got to start all over again. It couldn't have been Walsh."

WHILE I spun the dial of the phone booth in the Owl at the corner Wycherley kept talking to me through the door.

"I told you it was the guy you ran out," he said. "I told you Walsh was shielding somebody. I had a hunch you were off on the wrong foot all the time. You've got to come back to my view of it."

"Quite right," I said. "I've got to come back to your view of it. It was the one I ran out and Walsh knows who he is."

I was calling the emergency hospital. I missed what Wycherley was saying while the operator was giving me the doctor's sleepy voice.

After my identity had percolated he told me Walsh had been taken to the Christian Hospital. He muttered something about coma and paralysis.

I called the Christian Hospital. While a floor nurse was talking to me Wycherley got me by the shoulder and began barking, "Say! Say! Chuck!" into my ear in a loud voice. I shook him off until I got through. When I turned around his face was shining and he had the piece of check in his hand.

"I know what bank that is!" he said. "I knew it would come to me! That GHT has been chasing my brains around all evening. It's the Day and Night Bank. I had an account there a couple of years ago."

"Good, boy," I said, "That's fine. You're providing the only material of importance to this. All I draw are blanks. Walsh is still under and looks worse. He may not last until morning. They're keeping him going with caffein."

He was blinking his eyes at the check. "It may be one of two or three branches," he said, "but here's the number. I'll call the main office and find out."

"Do that right off," I said. "By the way, did you leave anyone at the office when you left?"

"The girl and Stevens were there," he said. "Working on that report on the Haines case."

"Use that other booth while I call them," I said. "As soon as you locate the bank it's our next stop."

I got the office and told Stevens to drop what he was doing and get up to the Christian Hospital. I told him to get in to Walsh and sit by his side if he had to put a dress on and pretend he was his wife; to call the office and tell the girl the moment he came to. I didn't know where I would be but I would call the office at fifteen-minute intervals.

When I came out Wycherley was com-

ing from the direction of the street door. "It's the Fisher Street branch," he said. "I've got a cab. Come on."

The Fisher Street branch took us twenty minutes. On the way we did our best to shove the situation together again.

"Now listen to me," said Wycherley. "If Walsh was sitting in that restaurant while the strangling was going on, then it wasn't Walsh they were blackmailing. It was some other big boy—some other copper. Walsh found his hat and slung it out to try to cover for him. Maybe Walsh was mixed up in it too, in a smaller degree. He tossed the hat over because he thought if his friend was run down he'd be washed out too."

"I can't follow you, boy," I said. "I still think it was Walsh that was blackmailed. The check must have been his check. He had the stroke when I said his name was on it."

"But if Walsh was the one that was blackmailed, then Walsh must have committed the murder, and Walsh didn't commit the murder."

"Right," I said. "He had someone else do it for him. A bird with an eight-and-a-quarter hat and a pair of wide shoulders."

The way he shook his head interfered with his trying to light a cigarette.

"We're quarreling about motives," I said. "We're agreed on the important thing. It was the bird I ran out of the flat. He may have been a copper that Walsh was fronting for, as you say, or he may have been someone Walsh got to do it. In any case he's the one."

He nodded this time. "We can clean up the other point when we get to the bank," he said. "If they can identify the check we'll know who it's written to. If it's Walsh, then you're right: he got the boy with the eight-and-a-quarter hat to throttle the checks out of Davenant. If it's somebody else, then that somebody else is a copper; he fits inside an eight-and-a-quarter hat, and he's the one we want."

"There's one chance in a million they can ever identify the check," I said. "There's too little of it to be of any use. But there's one thing they can do: they can tell us the one Halsted's been paying the checks to. Checks as big as eight thousand dollars aren't easily forgotten by a branch bank. We just need to get to the one who handled Halsted's account."

"Yeah," he said. "The bank should clear it up."

I HAD the driver drop us off at the corner before the Fisher Street branch so I could call the office. This was the river district, as busy by night as by day. I tried to listen to the girl talking while a shift of Poles from a rolling mill threw things around on the lunch counter behind me and called for food. The girl said there was no word from Stevens at the hospital. She said something else about a call from somebody for somebody that I could not catch.

"Talk louder, will you?" I said. "What was that about a call?"

The Poles came in at the first of what she said but at the end I just caught ". . . . . Twelve Forty-two Green Street."

That was Weiss's address.

I ground the receiver into the side of my head, pushed the heel of my hand into my other ear, closed my eyes and said: "Try it again, will you? This is important. What was that about Twelve Forty-two Green Street?"

I heard her this time. She must have been shouting.

"Were you there this evening?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes. What about it?"

"Somebody called for the man from this office who had been there."

"What?" I said. "Who was it? What did they say?"

"They said they'd call a little later to see if you were here."

"Is that all? No message?"

"No. That was all."

"He didn't know my name?"

"No."

"It was a man speaking?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was this?"

"A little while after you called before."

"Listen," I said. "If he calls again tell him my name is Carroll and to call me at the Fisher Street branch of the Day and Night Bank. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"And if I'm not there to call me at my home. Give him my number. Be sure you give it to him. Don't let him hang up without it."

"All right," she said.

I went out and got hold of Wycherley. "Somebody's trying to get in touch with me who knew I was at Weiss's this evening. They've phoned the office and are going to call again. What do you make of that? Is it Weiss? Is he going to come through with something?"

"Weiss?" he said, rolling his eyes at me with his lips down. "Don't kid yourself. What would he want to get in touch with you for? Didn't he nearly break his neck trying to get away from you?"

"But who else could it be?"

He grunted. "Looks to me like we've got everything to learn," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Banker's Hours

WE TOLD the driver to wait and started for the bank. It was a small place with two or three mill workers shaking ink on deposit slips and arguing in mixed English at the windows. A burly gray-headed pensioner got up off a stool inside the door and stepped toward us. We let him look at badges and told him we wanted whoever handled the H accounts. As he started across the floor ahead of us someone coming through the gate from the office section stumbled, recovered himself, and passed rapidly out the door. The office force all looked up and smiled.

The pensioner took us around behind the desks into the cage of the A-H teller. He was a little man with a sharp shriveled face and the whites of his eyes told stories about his liver. He wasn't very enthusiastic but told us to sit down. He examined the piece of check for a long time with his nose down to it, squeaking his desk chair back and forth.

"No one can identify this," he said in his thin icy voice, shaking his head. "It's impossible."

"I supposed that was the way it would be," I said. "But the point is, we know it's from Art Halsted's account. That's one of his checks—a canceled one. Now what you have to do is think back and remember who it was he paid it out to. He must have paid a lot like that, and to one person."

"You say this is from Art Halsted's account?" he said. "Art Halsted never had an account at this bank."

I looked at Wycherley. Wycherley looked at me. We both looked at the bank teller.

"What?" I said.

"I said Art Halsted never had an account at this bank," he said. "I ought to know. I'd have handled it if he did."

Our faces must have been as blank as the wall behind him. "But he must have!" I said. "Maybe someone handled it who was here before you."

He sniffed. "I've been in this cage ten years," he said.

We didn't say anything. We stopped looking at him and looked wall-eyed at each other. I turned to the teller again. "But that's one of your checks!" I said.

"Certainly. That's one of our checks. That's our number on it."

"Maybe he scratched out the name and wrote another bank in," said Wycherley.

"No," said the teller. "The scratches would show if he did. Or the name he wrote in. There's enough of the printing left for that."

We sat with our tongues against the top of our mouths. The same series of repercussions must have been going off in both our brains. If Halsted never had an account here, then the check was not Halsted's, and if it was not Halsted's what connection with the blackmailing could it have? Why in the name of all that's reasonable should someone try to sneak in and get it, if it wasn't one of the Halsted checks? Why should Walsh fall over when he heard his name was on it, if it wasn't one of the Halsted checks?

Wycherley was the first to recover. "Maybe Halsted had an account here under another name," he said.

"That couldn't be," I said. "If he signed another name to the checks they wouldn't be evidence. They wouldn't connect him with the copper. They couldn't be used for blackmailing. They must have his name on them."

THE teller drummed his fingers on the desk. "If you were to ask me," he said, "I'd say this isn't a canceled check at all, but a fresh check."

"What?" I said. "A fresh check!"

"Yes," he said. "I don't think this has ever been through a bank."

"Good Lord, man," said Wycherley, "you don't know what you're doing! You're knocking a whole situation apart. Is this just an idle thought, or is there some reason for what you're saying?"

"Well," he said more acidly, "I've handled a lot of checks in my time. A lot of canceled checks. I've more than one reason for thinking this isn't one. In the first place, there's no sign of cancelation stamps or perforations on it. There would be, in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases. Of course, this particular piece may have escaped. There's about a hundred-to-one chance that it would." He stopped and shot the bilious eyes up at us. "How did it happen to be torn like this?"

"As far as we know," I said, "it was ripped out of a girl's hand."

"Well, then," he said, "my other reason for thinking it isn't part of a canceled check is that if it was ripped out of somebody's hand it would have torn along the perforation holes."

We had nothing to offer. He took a pair of glasses out of a drawer, polished them, set them on the end of his nose and squinted at the check again. "It's my opinion," he said, "that this piece of check was torn deliberately."

Our eyes must have bunged out of our heads. This was too much to take in at one time. We sat there looking at him like a couple of rabbits at a snake while he took up the check between thumb and fingers and pulled at it a few times with his other hand.

"Check paper is tough," he said. "If you held that much in your hand and somebody tried to rip the rest of it away from you, it wouldn't tear. The whole thing would slip away from you. You couldn't hold on to it. There isn't enough there to get a purchase on. With ordinary paper, yes, but not with check paper. It's too thick and tough." He flipped a book of blank checks over to us. "Try it," he said.

We tried it. It gave us something to do while our scattered wits were trying to struggle together again. We tried it several times; we tried it until we were convinced. I can't tear a deck of cards apart, but I figured my hand was stronger than Davenant's. If I couldn't do it, she couldn't do it. It hadn't been done.

I sat back and ran my tongue over my lips and looked at Wycherley. "Well," I said, "this knocks everything into a cocked hat. It's just exploded, that's all. I don't know what to think now. There

isn't anything to think. If that check was torn deliberately, God only knows who, what, or why this thing is all about."

He pushed his hat back and stared at the floor. "You're right," he said. "It's just gone haywire."

I got up and looked around for a phone. "I'd better call the office again," I said. "Our only possible lead is this message that may come in."

"And Lord only knows who that is," said Wycherley. "It may be Davenant calling from the spirit world."

"There isn't any phone here," said the teller. "You can use the one over there in Mr. Walsh's office."

"Mr. who?" I said.

"Mr. Walsh," he said. "The manager."

"You mean to say there's a manager here named Walsh? Is he any relative of the Captain Walsh on the police force?"

"Why, I believe so," he said. "Why yes, he is. As a matter of fact he's his son."

I UTTERED something in a loud voice. Wycherley was on his feet. For the moment we were too stunned by this last of a series of shocks to do anything organized.

"Where is he?" I barked.

"Why, he's gone now," said the teller. "He was going out as you came in. He was the man who stumbled."

"Who stumbled!" I said. My mind raced back to try to recover some impression of the man who had left as we entered. I had given him scarcely a passing glance. A blond man, that was all I remembered, a blond man with something of the build of his father.

"We were all somewhat surprised that he should come in," said the teller. "He's not usually here during the night. But what's the matter, do you want him for anything?"

"Walsh! A son!" said Wycherley. "And skipped! Flew the coop right under our noses!"

I reached out at the teller. "Where would he go? Where does he live? What's his telephone number?"

"Why—Bryant Four-two-seven-seven. But—"

I pushed him out of the way and ran across the hall. Inside the office I whipped up the phone. On the desk beside me was a small brass plate saying Francis X. Walsh.

A woman answered. She had a nice voice and spoke with soft courtesy. I tried to match it as I said: "Is Mr. Walsh there?"

"Why no," she said. "He isn't. He stopped in about half past nine, but he went back to the bank again on business."

"About half past nine?" I said.

"Yes. Is there any message I can take for him? This is Mrs. Walsh speaking."

"This may seem a rather curious question, Mrs. Walsh," I said, "but would you mind telling me if, when he came in at half past nine, he was wearing a hat?"

"Why no, he wasn't," she said, and laughed a little. "As a matter of fact the reason he came home was to get another hat. He's so forgetful. He left it somewhere."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Walsh."

"But who—why—why do you—"

I put my forefinger down on the hook and hung the receiver in it, snapped to Wycherley: "Walsh stopped home at half past nine to get another hat!"

He stood back. "Good Lord!" he said. "He—"

I got him by the arm. "He was the man I ran out of the flat! It's all falling together now. No wonder the old man tossed the hat out! No wonder he recognized it! It was his son's."

"He's our man!" he said. "He's the one we want!"

"The old man put him up to it!" I said. "He *was* the one that was blackmailed. The son must have protected Halsted's account here."

THE teller was in the door. "I found out something else about Mr. Walsh." There was a certain maliciousness in his eyes—perhaps he didn't like the manager. "The cashier tells me that he came here and drew a large sum of money out of his personal account. Ten thousand dollars—in cash. He carried it out with him in a briefcase."

"Gone!" said Wycherley. "Hit out! And twenty minutes headstart!"

I grabbed the phone again. "The only thing—"

I stopped. Someone was calling: "Carroll! Mr. Carroll! Is there anyone here named Carroll?"

I swung the door. A girl was standing by the office gate calling out over the floor. "Here," I said. "What is it?"

"A telephone message," she said. "Someone calling for you."

I sprang through billing and adding and bookkeeping machines and ran for the phone she pointed to. I got the receiver to my ear. It was a harsh voice, nervous.

"Is this Carroll?"

"Yes."

"You're the one from the D. A.'s office?"

"Yes."

"You're the one who was with me tonight?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Weiss."

I hid my consternation by clearing my throat. "Yes?" I said. "What's on your mind?"

He also did some throat clearing. I could almost hear his tongue running over his lips, see his black eyes darting about under the two shocks of hair.

"I want to talk to you about something," he said. "I want to make you a proposition. It's about getting me off. Are you interested?"

"I'm interested in anything at all you've got to say."

He said: "What I want to know first is, can you get me off?"

"What do you mean?" I said. "For blackmailing?"

"That's it," he said. He snapped the words nervously. "I want to know can you squash what's on me, if I hand you something else."

"Why, easiest thing in the world," I said. "We'll make you clean as a whistle if you've got something that's interesting enough."

"This is interesting enough," he said. "What I mean to do is hand you the murderer, not just talk about him, but give him right into your hands—if you'll give me your word I'm free of the other business."

"Good Lord, man," I said. "The blackmailing isn't anything. You're free as air of that, you've got my solemn oath, you've got ten of them; only come across with the other."

There must have been conviction in my voice. He said: "All right. I'm taking you. I'm giving you the guy. Be at Four Forty-six Larchmont Street at a quarter to twelve. A quarter to twelve midnight. Not sooner, not later. Don't bring a lot of bulls along. Don't try to surround the place. If you try any of that stuff the guy'll be wise and never show up. It's an empty house, see. You get in through the side door. Be there on the dot and if you fumble it then it's your own fault."

I said: "Four Forty-six Larchmont Street." I was writing it down. "It's—hello—it's—"

"You've got that?" he said. "I'll see you there."

There was a click. He'd hung up.

CHAPTER SIX

446 Larchmont

I DON'T suppose a taxi driver ever made so much time in his life as ours did getting to 446 Larchmont Street. He knew by our expressions something was up, and he knew he could go as fast as he pleased and bend his cab into two right angles so long as he got there. He was in the spirit of the thing and kept throwing his eyes back over his shoulder and grinning every time he got through something that all the laws of probability had set down for a smash-up. We both sat forward inside with our jaws set staring into the rays of the headlights. Wycherley kept worrying through the side of his mouth about the time; he was afraid that by getting there before the hour Weiss had set we would muff it. It was now twenty minutes to eleven.

"We won't," I snapped. "Weiss didn't know that Walsh had got scared and left sooner, that's all. We know he's on his way, don't we? We know he's there now."

"If we pull a Brodie on this—" he said, and clamped his lips together.

After a time he said: "How do you suppose Weiss knew where Walsh would go?"

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "He must have got to him in some way after they both ran out."

He said with a puzzled scowl: "I wish I knew where Weiss fits in, in this."

"Wherever he fits, he's on our side," I said.

We sang through the night. Lights shot by brakes squealed, voices roared at us. The driver seemed disappointed that we didn't pick up a cop.

When we got to Larchmont Street we hammered on the window and got De Paolo to brake down to a glide. We watched the numbers carefully and had him cut the lights a good way from the address. It was a neighborhood full of sleep and small houses. A block away we had him park in an alley and got out to reconnoitre.

The moon had not come up. I seldom remember seeing such a dark night. The clouds were low and it was warm and muggy, with a hint of rain.

We figured the house's position in the block by calculating street numbers. I was to start along the sidewalk and Wycherley was to take the alley that led up behind. While we stood there I looked over the gun of Walsh's that I had in my pocket. It seemed peculiarly ironical that I might have to shoot the son with his father's gun.

There was nobody on the street when I walked up it; there seemed nobody stirring in the whole neighborhood. My feet made a loud and hollow sound.

It was a big barnlike house whose windows were nailed over with boards. Boarded up that way it was the perfect trap—entirely quiet.

I turned into the driveway of the house next door, slipped through the yard to the side fence, and waited for Wycherley.

He was not long coming and he picked his way forward from the alley like some huge prowling cat. We could both see the side entrance across from us, a vague oblong set in behind a mass of overhanging dead vines. As far as we could hear there was not a movement in the house.

WE GOT over the fence cautiously. I had the flashlight in one hand and Walsh's gun in the other. The door was unpainted and there was no knob on it. Wycherley put his hand on it and it yielded. He swung it softly wide into blackness. We stepped inside.

There was an instant then when the very nerve-ends in our skins were alert and tingling. A throat rasped to clear it-

self somewhere back in the darkness.

I had my thumb on the flashlight button but I did not press it. I moved my hand seven or eight inches to command the place where the sound had been. We stood on each side of the doorway.

A voice, hoarse with tension, said: "Is that you? I've been waiting."

I pressed the button. The ray seemed to leap out thirty feet and catch the form of a man. He was sitting on a box. There was a crumpled leather something between his legs.

He shot up one hand before his face. It was a blond face, rugged.

I said: "Put up your hands, Walsh. You're under arrest for the murder of Sally Davenant."

Three things happened then simultaneously. He flung himself sideways out of the ray. Wycherley jumped forward into it and I spotted a door beside the box.

In that second I did one of the wisest things I ever did in my life. I turned and sprang back through the door I had just come in. I could hear Wycherley plunging and battering across the floor, as I came out to the sidewalk with my head down and my knees pumping like pistons.

He was going down the sidewalk. Blindly, not seeking cover, just tearing straight away.

I shouted: "Stop, you fool, or I'll drop you!"

He didn't stop. I was doing all I could and there were only fifty feet between us. I shot at random.

He threw himself sideways at a tree and went down on his face. For an instant I thought I had hit him. The next instant I was on him. He had not yet clawed to his knees. I had the gun in the side of his jaw and I said: "Try some more of that and I'll blow the front of your face off."

He fell back on his elbows and his face was grooved with harsh, desperate, stricken lines. His knees shook and the quivering communicated itself in a spasm over his entire body. He had no gun.

"Get up," I said.

Wycherley came bolting up the sidewalk with a briefcase in his hand. I said: "Get the cab, Nate, and bring it up here for him."

I stood with the gun shoved under the bottom of his ribs and put my face close to his. "You're through, Walsh," I said. "We've got you. Come clean. You killed Davenant."

He had not yet mastered his spasmodically shaking body. It was obvious it was a sort of muscular collapse over which he had no control. It was no index to his mind. His face was stony, with a peculiar fixed rigidity. He kept his distended unblinking gray eyes on me and said nothing.

I shoved the gun further into his side. "Come out with it," I snapped. "You did it. You killed her. You shoved her back over the sofa and strangled her."

"No," he said tonelessly.

"Don't deny it," I said. "We know you did it. What good will it do you to deny it? You're sewed up in a bag. What did you do it for?"

"No," he said in the same way, only louder, and his lips jerked.

"There's a cab coming, Walsh," I said. "When you get in it you're starting on a long journey. A journey from which you'll never come back. Why keep on saying no? Come clean and have it over."

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

EXCEPT for his partly open mouth and the breath coming irregularly through it, his face was as immobile and expressionless as wood. Only his voice kept rising in key; his eyes had not moved from mine or blinked.

I took him by the coat lapel and cen-

tered my eyes further into those staring pupils. "You're a dead man, Walsh," I said. "You're a hanged man tonight. You can't hide from anyone what we know already, what everyone will know tomorrow. Why did you strangle her?"

"What are you talking about?" he said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I jerked him. "We've got your hat," I snapped. "We've got the piece of check you came back for. We know about the blackmailing. We know about Art Halsted's checks. We know the part your father played in this. He had you kill him. Don't say no. He had you kill her for the checks."

For the first time expression came into his face. It was when I mentioned his father. His eyes twitched; the muscles of his jaw contracted. It was a movement of shock; astonishment was in his wide pupils. Then the lights of the cab flashed and the car slued up to the curb. Walsh swung his eyes that way.

During the interruption of getting him into the cab my mind worked quickly. This was no hardened criminal, this was an intelligent man, a nervous man, a man of impulses. The frozen attitude was not natural, it was a defense movement, purely instinctive. I was sure there was some way I would crack that stoniness if I could only touch the right spring. It was not a matter of buldgeoning. It was a matter of putting my finger in the right place, on the right emotional chord. I had had a flash of something when I mentioned his father.

I sat in the auxiliary seat facing him while Wycherley gave a word to the driver and got in and slammed the door. I leaned forward and pressed my knees into the knees of the man between us.

"Walsh," I said, close to his face, "there's only one man that's going to suffer if you don't come through. That man is your father."

"What?" he said. Again there was that shock in his eyes, fighting through the mask of his features.

"If you don't talk," I said, "your father will hang in your place. He's going to take this for you. He's going to take the murder on his shoulders. He's confessed, Walsh. He's confessed to shield you."

I had to reach him. I felt sure this was the way.

For the first time the man himself looked through his eyes. "It's a lie!" he said hoarsely. "My father never had anything to do with it!"

"Listen," I said. "Let me tell you some things you don't know. While you were making your getaway from the flat the police were coming. Your father was with them. He was first out to the back door and he saw your hat. He recognized it. He threw it over the porch to get it away. I found it in the areaway. When he came down for it later I caught him. He knew the game was up. He knew what both of you were facing. He tried to take it all himself. He confessed. He said he killed the girl. He's going to hang for you, Walsh."

His breath was panting through his throat. The immobility of his face was broken up into separate suffering parts. "It's all lies!" he said. "You're doing this to try to trick me into talking!"

"You know it's true, Walsh," I said. "You know your father would be called in to a murder in the central district. He found your hat. He's confessed. And now we're going to the Christian Hospital where he's lying on his back unconscious from a heart attack."

"What!" he said. "My father is—"

"The shock was too much for him," I said. "He took it but he couldn't stand up under it. He's dying, Walsh. Or if he comes back it's to face the noose."

"Oh my God!" he said, and threw his head forward between his hands. "Oh

my God!" The voice was rent out of him. It seemed to tear his throat.

Wycherley pushed his hands down and shoved his head up again.

I put on the heavy artillery. "Are you going to let him take it? Are you going to let him die for you?" I swore at him. I cursed him out.

"No! No!" he cried. "I'll tell you everything! Let me alone! Where is he? Let me see him! He didn't have anything to do with it!"

HE'D broken. Words rushed out of his mouth, fumbling words, broken words, words that had no meaning. He fought at Wycherley to get his head down. I signed to Nate to let him go and changed over to the seat beside him. I put one arm over his shoulders and said in a different voice: "I can see how it was. You did it to shield him from disgrace, didn't you?"

He took his head up from his hands and looked at me. "I didn't do it!" he said. "I swear to God I didn't do it!"

There was something in his voice that was either absolute sincerity or else he was the most consummate actor I had ever seen. Either was incredible.

"What's that?" I said.

"I paid her the money!" he said. "I went up there and paid her for the checks! When I left she was still there!"

"You paid her the money!" I said.

"Yes! Eight thousand dollars! My own check!"

"Good Lord!" I said. My eyes were on Wycherley. "The piece of check is his!"

"My father knew nothing about it!" he said. "He hasn't been mixed up in any of this!"

"But they were his checks!" I said.

"Yes!" He jerked up his head when he said it.

"He was the one that was being blackmailed!" said Wycherley.

"No! They were blackmailing me."

"You!" I said. "You mean to say your father didn't know about it?"

"Not a thing! She came to me. She was going to take Halsted's checks to the newspapers unless I paid." The words ran out of his mouth. "I said nothing to my father. It was too much of a shock to me at first to know he had taken money from Halsted. Then I thought I would talk to him about it after I had the checks back."

Wycherly said across to me: "Too wise to go to the old man. He'd have had them by the heels."

"You speak of her alone," I said. "Wasn't there anyone else with her?"

He shook his head. "She was the only one I ever dealt with. The only one I ever saw. I didn't know there was anyone else."

"So she asked you for the money and you paid it to her," I said. "And your father didn't know anything about it. Didn't even know she had the checks. Is that right?"

"Yes," he said.

"You never threatened her? Never had any words about the matter? How did you act when she first approached you?"

"As soon as I recognized they were authentic I said I would pay for them."

"You did no arguing."

"No. What good would it have been to argue?"

WYCHERLEY and I exchanged a look that spoke volumes about the man between us. "You got the checks when you went up there?" I asked.

"Yes. Eight of them. I was to pay a thousand dollars a check. I burned them."

"What time was this that you went up to see her?"

"About six o'clock."

According to my calculations that was about an hour before the murder.

"How long did you stay?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Was there anyone else in the flat when you were there?"

"No. No one."

"To whom was the check made out?"

"It was made out to cash."

"To cash? Did she ask for it that way?"

"No. I didn't know her name until I went up there tonight."

"I see," I said. "Now Walsh, how did it happen that after you got the checks and went, you came sneaking back into the flat about two hours later, punching the fuses before you came in?"

He said: "I got a telephone call some time after I reached home. Someone told me that the girl had been murdered, that a piece of my check was in her hand, that unless I brought ten thousand dollars to a certain address by a quarter to twelve midnight, the rest of my check with my name on it would be dropped in a mailbox addressed to the district attorney's office."

"What's this!" I said.

"Good Lord!" said Wycherly. "What are you saying? Are you making this up as you go along?"

He clenched his fists together. "It's the truth! Why should I tell you anything else? I've told you the only part I tried to keep secret."

The bank teller's voice saying, "This piece of check was torn deliberately," kept ringing in my ears.

"The address was Four Forty-six Larchmont Street?"

"Yes."

"And the time was a quarter to twelve?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a voice was it?"

"I don't know—just an ordinary voice. After he hung up I—I tried to get over to the apartment and get the check. I was a fool, I was crazy, but I thought there might be a chance. I was beside myself. I couldn't stay away. It seemed quiet inside and I took the risk. Afterwards I went home for another hat and then went straight over to the bank for the money. I knew that if the rest of the check were mailed in, then the hat I had dropped somewhere could be traced to me and the case was clinched against me. I had to get my hands on that check. I was too wrought up to wait. I went to the address thinking whoever had it might be there sooner."

I was sitting up straight. I had my watch in my hand. "You're right, Walsh," I said. "You *are a fool.* You've done so many blundering things, you've been such an easy mark, I'm almost inclined to believe your story. You're coming back with us to the house. You're going to go in there with the money and we're going in with you. We're going to find out who this is." I began a tattoo on the window. "Turn the cab!" I shouted. "Back to Four Forty-six Larchmont Street!" I got my head through the partition and cried: "Speed, boy, speed!"

It was twenty-five minutes to twelve.

"But Great Scott!" said Wycherley in a staggered way, "if this one didn't do it, who did?"

"I don't know," I said, "but we should know in about fifteen minutes."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death in the Dark

FOR the second time the night ran into a blur around us while the cab hummed toward 446 Larchmont Street. The presence of Walsh kept us from talking; we sat forward tensely with our eyes front. What was ahead of us? Would we be too late? Would the one waiting

think the game was up and go? Was this after all nothing but a well-spun story of Walsh's? But I knew in my heart I believed the man. It was absurd that anyone should take ten thousand dollars for a run-out and go and sit on a box with it in a deserted house. But who could it be that was fleecing him? Was it Weiss? What had been the matter with Weiss when I first got to him?

And why should Weiss call to tell me when and where the meeting was to be, if he was the one who had arranged it?

Whoever had torn that check had murdered the girl. Why had it been torn? Why had it been torn deliberately when it was made out to cash?

The explanation of the torn check came on me with such suddenness that I exclaimed aloud. I turned and reached across to Wycherley. "I know!" I said. "I've got it! This is the way it was: after Walsh paid the money someone tried to get the check out of Davenant. He strangled her for it; that's what she was strangled for, for Walsh's eight thousand dollars. In the struggle the check was torn, or defaced—rendered useless in some way. Whoever it was realized it was valueless and decided to plant part of it so as to implicate Walsh and get money out of him again. That's the only way it can be. Having lost the eight thousand dollars he's trying to recoup for ten."

He stared at me. "But is it Weiss?" he asked. "Is Weiss trying the long chance of turning Walsh in and getting the money at the same time?"

I didn't answer him. We were there. We jumped out into the same alley where our old tracks still showed and had a second's consultation. Wycherly was to cover the rear door that Walsh had got out of. I was to go in the side with Walsh. We were all to go up the alley lest anyone watching from the front see that Walsh was not alone.

We came through the yard and stood once more on the other side of the fence from the vine-shrouded recessed oblong. The door was closed. When I had left I had thrown it open. Someone had gone in.

WE got over the fence quietly. Wycherley pressed my elbow and was gone into the darkness. I shoved the flashlight into Walsh's hand and breathed in his ear: "Use this when I tell you."

His breath was coming in a shallow quick way but his body seemed steady. The tension of his arm under my hand seemed to say that he was screwed up to take whatever might happen.

We went forward to the door. I pushed it. We went in almost as one man.

It was black as pitch. I pressed Walsh's arm and he said hoarsely: "It's me—Walsh."

A voice said out of the blackness: "Have you brought the money?"

I could feel the muscles around my eyes gathering together, my jaw stiffening forward. It was an ordinary voice. None I recognized. Low.

"Yes," said Walsh.

"In cash?"

"Yes."

"Walk forward slowly until you touch a table. Put the money on the table."

I took the briefcase out of Walsh's hand and walked forward. I found the edge of the table and set the briefcase upon it. Then a movement on the other side and a hand took hold of the briefcase. I took hold of the hand.

I shoved my other fist with the gun in it into the body across the table and said: "Use the flashlight, Walsh!"

There seemed to leap out of the darkness into glaring white relief the face of the skull-headed man.

"You!" I said.

He threw himself back with such violence that his arm whipped up straight and cracked as though he had unsocketed the elbow. He screamed. It filled the place; it made the hair rise on the back of my neck; it seemed to come from the roots of his body. He was a small man; the look on his face was of utter, abject terror.

"You're the one!" I said. "Stand still or I'll blow you open!"

"Let me alone!" he screamed.

"You did it!" I said. "You killed her! Come in, Nate! We've got him!"

He shrieked: "I didn't kill her! I didn't kill her! I'll tell you who did! I'll—"

Flame streaked from the darkness overhead. The crash seemed to engulf both of us; powder fumes rushed choking into my lungs. I could feel in the hand I held the shock through the body of the skull-headed man. He pitched forward, hit the table, collapsed on the floor.

I staggered back.

Feet were battering over the floor above me. "Upstairs!" I cried. "The light! Walsh! Nate! Upstairs!"

Walsh was swinging the light wildly. A square opening was in the low ceiling; a ladder went up. As I dove for it another shot crashed over the floor above.

Then silence.

I PLUNGED over the top of the ladder upon rough wood. Labored irregular breathing came from my left.

Weiss's voice rasped: "I said I'd get him for you! I got him!"

Wycherly was clawing up behind me with the flashlight. I snatched it from him and impaled Weiss, crawling toward a dark mass on the floor.

I dove at the mass and threw it over on its back. It was Chung.

"You!" I cried.

He was alive. His slitted eyes were on me almost without expression. Blood dyed the front of his clothes.

Weiss made a scrambling effort to throw himself upon him. "You will try to poison me, will you?" he screamed.

I shoved him off. "It was you all the time! You yellow devil! No wonder you were nervous when I talked to you! You'd just come from strangling her!"

"He did it!" cried Weiss. "Him and that skull-faced dope of his!"

Chung's eyes were two oblique lines. They gave his face an inscrutable expression, an almost mocking expression.

"You faked the ride-out to get yourself out of the picture!" I said. "You gave me Weiss's address so I would hold him until you got this over! You wouldn't tell me who was being blackmailed—no—because you wanted to squeeze him again yourself!"

"But I got to him!" said Weiss. "In his own house! He tried to stand me off by taking me on this! But I foxed the—"

"Talk, Chung," I said. "You're through. You won't see morning. Did you kill her to get the check?"

"Yes," he said. "I not live. No matter now. I choke her. She tear check."

"You tore off the corner and planted it on Walsh?" I said.

"Yes," he murmured. "He fool. He pay. I call you in. You fool. I ride off in own automobile. You make mistake. Not me. You let Weiss go."

"You had your friend downstairs call Walsh?"

"Yes." His lip curled back once more. "Catspaw," he said.

He opened his eyes with a considerable effort, holding mine. Mockery was there, life fighting against the glaze that seemed to be forming over them. "I cheat you all," he said.

He closed his eyes. His head fell to one side. Chung was dead.

MURDER AISLE

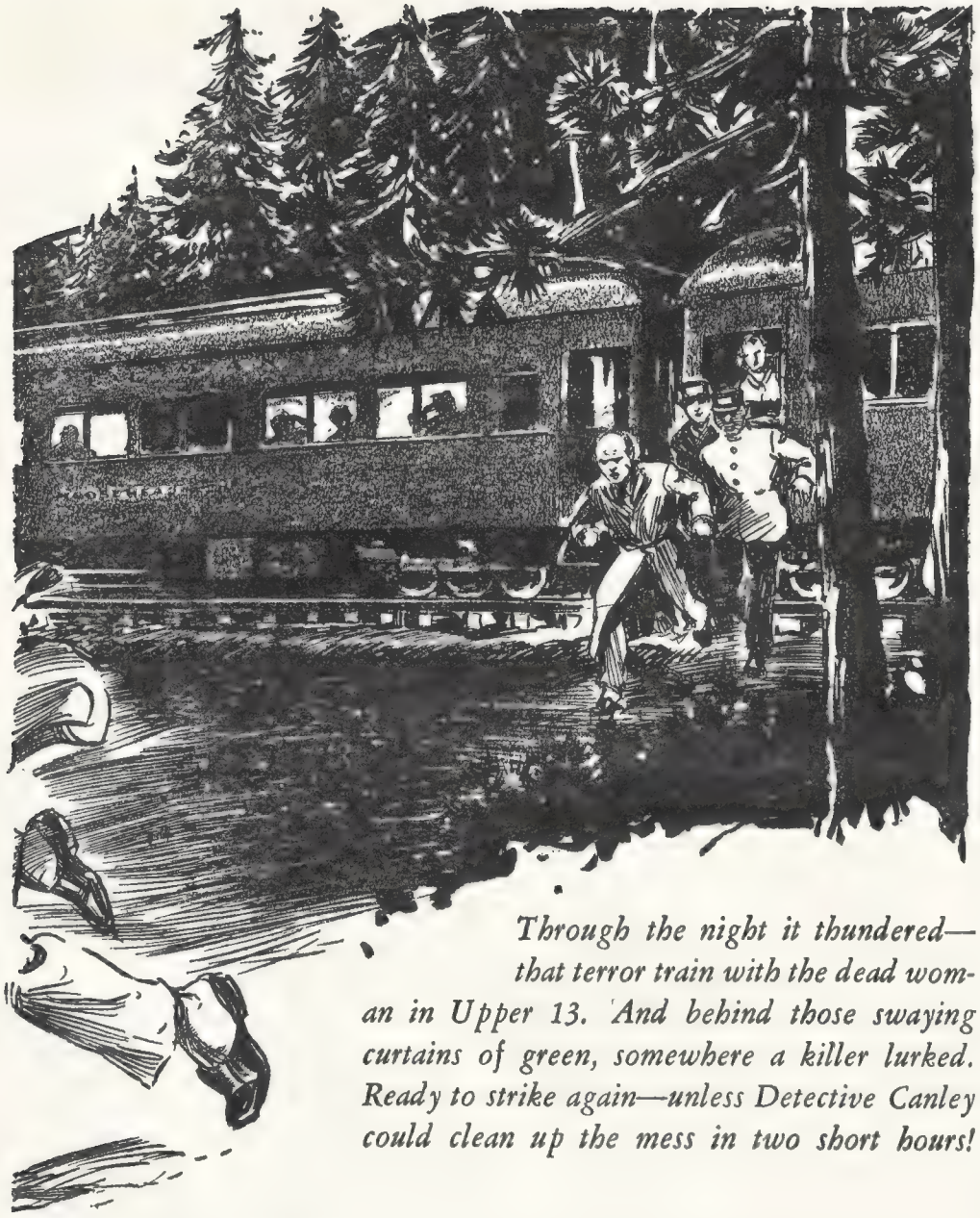
By

Oscar Schisgall

Author of "Death on the Wall," etc.



But I didn't get back—I dived straight at his legs.



Through the night it thundered—that terror train with the dead woman in Upper 13. And behind those swaying curtains of green, somewhere a killer lurked. Ready to strike again—unless Detective Canley could clean up the mess in two short hours!

CHAPTER ONE

The Girl in Upper 13

NEWSPAPER headlines shouted many strange things about that murder in the Pullman car, and most of them exasperated me. The actual facts of the case—to begin about an hour before the tragedy itself—were these.

Just before midnight the heavy green curtains of my berth parted an inch or two, and a man's hand slowly came through the slit to settle on the pillow within reach of my throat. It was a fleshy hand, unusually white, with brightly polished fingernails; the sort of hand that suggested middle-aged flabbiness. It lay motionless; yet I stared at it with a kind of astonished revulsion.

The rumble of the train, racing through

the Maine woods, had kept me awake. I'd been reading a magazine in the stuffy berth, and the little lamp over my head was lit. But the light couldn't have been visible out in the aisle.

For a second I watched the hand in amazement. A queer tension crept over me. Then I carefully put aside the magazine and pounced upon the fat wrist.

Instantly, from beyond the curtains, came a gasp. The arm tried to jerk away. But I held it hard while I parted the curtains and scowled out at the man.

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"Excuse me, please!" he ejaculated.

"Looking for anything?"

"I—I've made a mistake! I belong in the next berth—"

He checked himself, breathless and abashed, and we looked at each other. Maybe he realized his explanation was the old, old one used by crooks ever since Pullman installed sleepers; and pretty unconvincing by this time. He was short and heavy and pink, with a face that reminded me of a fat Satan. The eyes were slanted, almost feline, and above them black brows formed a wide V. He had thick lips that were too red. And he wore an ornate purple dressing gown over mauve pajamas.

When I released his wrist, he nursed it against his chest, like a child. A sheepish grin twisted his mouth.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I know it sounds silly. I'd just gone for a drink, and I wasn't watching very closely."

"Better be careful," I advised drily. "You'll poke your fist into a woman's birth sometime, and maybe you'll reach for a bit of real trouble."

He laughed. "I hope I didn't wake you?"

"No," I answered. And then, because he looked so genuinely embarrassed, I added, "All right, all right. Let's forget it and go to sleep. Good night."

When I lay back, I could hear him climb into his own berth. I extinguished the light and for a while lay still, my eyes closed. But nothing happened. The minutes dragged like hours; sleep simply wouldn't come. In the end I got out of bed in a black mood, shrugged into my own dressing gown, and went down the swaying aisle toward the smoking compartment for a cigarette.

The conductor—a fellow named Bob Tryton—was standing at the end of the car, looking through a newspaper. He had the florid face and the husky figure of a fighting Irishman; and when I approached, he glanced up with a grin.

"You, too, Mr. Canley?" he asked.

"I, too—what?"

"Waiting up for the show?"

I stopped in the aisle, puzzled, meanwhile taking a pack of cigarettes from my pocket. "What show?"

TRYTON chuckled as he folded the paper. "Guess you're the only passenger who doesn't know about it," he said. "The porter's been whispering it to everybody else. We're stopping at Pine Center to pick up May Dixon."

The name was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't immediately place it. Tryton made it sound important, however, so I asked, "Who's May Dixon?"

"Say!" he laughed. "Don't tell me you don't know *her!*"

"Am I supposed to know her?"

"She's a radio singer. You know, 'The Voice With The Sob'. A couple of months ago she was voted the most beautiful girl on the air; and all these gents"—Tryton nodded along the length of the car—"they're all waiting for a close-up of her. So am I, for that matter," he chuckled. "I hear she's a real knockout."

Well, May Dixon didn't mean anything to me—yet. I grunted and went into the

smoking compartment. Two men were sitting there, talking about the President and his New Deal. But there wasn't a new thought between them; their words were carbon copies of the day's editorials. After exchanging nods, I settled down in a corner, lit a cigarette, and listened to their political blabber with increasing boredom.

I don't know what it was that made me so unusually nervous this night. So restless. Presentiment, maybe. Anyhow, I found myself strained, my faculties on edge. Perhaps that was why I resented the unending chatter of these two men. One of them—whose name, I later learned, was Doctor Theodore Telleger—had the personality of a Supreme Court Justice. He was tall, lean, grave, with a really aristocratic countenance. There was gray over his temples, and he wore pince-nez from which a black ribbon flowed to his neck.

The other fellow reminded me of a fox terrier. He was small, thin, jerky in his movements. He had sharp features in a thin face and crafty little eyes. When he spoke, in a high-pitched voice, he bent far forward to tap Doctor Telleger's knee for emphasis. I was glad he didn't attempt to include me in the conversation and possibly try to paw me, too. He had reserved a berth—it later developed—under the name of Henry Webb . . .

Suddenly the train slowed, with a grinding of brakes. Their talk abruptly ended. Both men pressed their noses to the window and peered out into the darkness.

"Pine Center, I presume," said Doctor Telleger.

"Yeah," agreed Webb. "The conductor told me we ought to pull in just about midnight. It's a funny hour to pick up a celebrity." He paused, then added: "We ought to get a good look at May Dixon. She's in this car. If she's half as beautiful as she's supposed to be, she'll make an eyeful."

I got up then, too restless even to smoke. When I stepped out of the compartment, I found that Bob Tryton, the conductor, had already opened the door and was on the steps, waiting to hop off to the station platform. The porter, a Negro with eyes as big as eggs, stood behind him.

This, as I said, was an hour or so before the murder . . .

I'M curious and human, so I paused for a glimpse of "the most beautiful girl on the air." The night wind, swirling into the car, was cold, but it didn't send me to my berth. And when at last the train stopped, I had my first view of May Dixon.

Rumor hadn't exaggerated. She *was* lovely—young, slim, vibrant, with ash-blond hair. Her face was vivid, and she wore the sort of smart clothes that proclaim the salary of a star. Down there on the platform, while the porter gathered her luggage, she was a delightful sight for jaded eyes.

I turned away, looked into the smoking compartment where Doctor Telleger and Webb were grinning through the window like gargoyles.

"What's *she* got to worry about?" cackled Webb. "Earning maybe three-four thousand a week? And boy! Look at the jewels on her, will you? Pearls—I'll bet they're real, too— and diamond rings!"

I had to smile. A salary of "three-four thousand a week" sounded like fabulous billions to me. I was drawing seventy-five dollars every Saturday for being a detective on this railroad. While this girl, because there was "a sob in her voice"—

But I didn't begrudge her the money.

I tossed the cigarette away, went back

to my berth, and forgot May Dixon. In fact, I actually fell asleep this time and must have snored some forty-five minutes before Bob Tryton's hand seized my shoulder and violently shook me awake.

"Mr. Canley!" he whispered hoarsely. "Mr. Canley!"

I sat up in a daze, blinking at him. The conductor's heavy face was yellow, the eyes bulging in terror. There was perspiration on his forehead, and the hand he had placed on my shoulder was trembling in a kind of palsey.

"What the devil's wrong?" I blurted.

He whispered, "Look! In the name of —of heaven, Mr. Canley, *look!*"

He was pointing wildly down the aisle.

I thrust my head out of the curtains, and instantly I seemed to freeze. Something happened to my whole body. I felt paralyzed, dumfounded—and a little sick.

For May Dixon, with her loosened hair hanging down in long streamers, dangled out of her berth. She was in a nightgown, and her chest was visible. There was blood on her neck, blood on her shoulders, blood on her naked arms.

And from her throat protruded the hilt of the long knife that had murdered her!

CHAPTER TWO

Emergency Signal

ORDINARILY I'm not a squeamish man. I've seen enough trouble in my time to harden me against most shocks. Tonight, however, as I swung out of my berth with my eyes fastened on that horrible sight, I was stupefied. I pulled on my dressing gown mechanically, moved unsteadily toward May Dixon's berth. It didn't make me feel any better to realize that, as a company detective, I'd be expected to take charge.

"Good Lord!" huskily gasped Tryton. "This is—"

"Hold it!" I snapped.

"She-she's dead!"

I retorted harshly, "With a knife in her jugular, what the hell else could she be?"

Tryton groaned, then stammered, "There's a doctor in Lower Two, Doctor Telleger—"

"All right. Get him."

The conductor stumbled away, and I halted beside the dangling torso that had been radio's prize beauty; looked down bitterly into her face. For a few seconds I felt too nauseated to do anything else. She was just a youngster—no more than twenty-one or so. And a newly-wed, judging from the gossip I'd heard in the smoking comparment. I visioned her kissing the young man on the station platform a little while ago—and now this—

My nerves steadied, and I shot a glance along the aisle. For the first time I saw George, the porter. That was really his name—George Abraham Lincoln Lee. He stood shivering as if the ghosts of all his ancestors loomed in front of him. His eyes bulged; his lips hung open; and speechless terror held him petrified.

Looking back at May Dixon's body, I found her blood still dripping slowly to the floor. Her wide death-stare was fixed on the ceiling. I knew it was against the law to touch a murdered body, of course. But I couldn't let her dangle like that, perhaps to be thrown out when the train went around a sharp bend. Moreover, I didn't want to launch panic in the car by allowing the other passengers to see her as she was. So I caught her shoulders and thrust her back into the berth—and as I moved her, somebody at my right cried a hoarse: "Goo-ood heavens!"

It was the fat, red-lipped man who had thrust his hand into my berth an hour ago—"by mistake." He was staring through the curtains of his own berth; the one next to May Dixon's. Staring

in a way that made him look more than ever like a fat, middle-aged Satan.

"Better get some clothes on," I advised him grimly. "There won't be much sleep in this car."

By that time Tryton, followed by the tall Doctor Telleger in pajamas, was lurching back toward me. I stepped away, allowing the physician to make an examination of his own. He was very pale, very stiff; and while he bent over May Dixon in her berth, I whispered to Tryton: "How much do you know about it, Bob?"

"N-not a thing, Mr. Canley!"

"How'd you find her?"

"I'd gone into the next car for a couple of minutes, and when I came back just now, there she was! Hanging out of the curtains, with a knife in—in her neck—just like you saw her! I—Gee, I didn't—"

"So she was stabbed while you stepped into the car ahead," I interrupted. "How long were you gone?"

"No more than three-four minutes!"

I nodded; pressed on: "How soon do we make our next stop?"

"Not till we get to Rockport. That's at four-twenty. It's just one-ten now."

DOCTOR Telleger, who looked dignified even when undressed, turned to us. He was absolutely colorless. The knife, blood-stained and held in a corner of a bed-sheet, was in his hand.

"There's nothing more I can do," he said quietly.

I asked, "How long do you think she's been dead?"

"Hardly ten minutes."

"She must have died instantly," groaned Tryton.

The man with the red lips was in the the aisle behind me now, a pair of trousers frantically drawn on over his pajamas. He was so excited that his breath escaped him in irregular spurts. Moreover, George, the porter, had finally ventured nearer. He stood shivering within a few feet of me; clinging to the curtains of the fat man's berth.

"Didn't you see anything, George?" I demanded.

"Lawdy, no, Mr. Canley!" he moaned hoarsely. "I—I was in my corner, polishing shoes! I didn't see nothing!"

"Didn't hear anybody moving along the aisle?"

"No, sir!"

I looked at the satanic man. His fleshy face was ghastly. "How about you?"

"I was asleep!" he whispered.

"And nothing disturbed you?"

"Nothing, until I heard you and the conductor talking!"

So there we stood, while the train thundered on, and dazedly faced mystery. The doctor had replaced the knife in May Dixon's berth. He appeared to be calmer than anyone else, though his aristocratic face was as gray as the hair at his temples; and his lips formed a grim, tight line.

I was just about to part the curtains again when George stammered in my ear: "Th-that knife, Mr. Canley!"

"What about it?"

"I gave it to her!"

I swung around and stared. So did the others. For a moment there was silence, while George gulped and rolled his eyes in agony.

"What do you mean?" I flung out. "When did you give it to her? Why?"

"J-just after she'd got into bed!" he quavered miserably. "She rings for me. And I go see what's what. And she asks, have I got a knife, please. Seems like there's a package with some books or something she wants to cut open. So I get her this knife, it being handiest. She says, all right, she'll return it to me later. And I go back to shining the shoes, never thinking—"

I parted May Dixon's curtains. Down at the foot of her berth lay some brown paper and a piece of cord; apparently they had been wrapped around books, for two novels were at her side.

"If that's the case," Doctor Telleger said into my ear, "it begins to look like an entirely unpremeditated murder. Nobody could have guessed or known he would find a knife here, waiting to be used. That is, nobody except the porter, who gave it to her."

"Me?" George was shocked into shrillness. "Gawd, Mr. Canley, I d-d-didn't—"

I waved him to silence. Looking down at May Dixon, I suddenly realized she wasn't wearing any of the jewelry that had adorned her when she'd been on the platform. What had become of her string of pearls? Of her brilliant rings? . . . Her purse lay in the rack over her head, and I reached for it.

"Just a second, sir!" came the quiet, hard voice of Doctor Telleger. "Before you touch anything, may I inquire by what right we assume the liberty of—"

Tryton hastily put in: "It's all right, Doctor, it's all right! Mr. Canley here is a detective. He—he works for the railroad."

"Oh?"

I hadn't even turned to glance at them. May Dixon's purse was open in my hands. But it contained no jewels. I frowned; thrust a hand under her pillow and searched there; even raised her head so that I might lift the pillow. But there was not a single trace of the glittering things she had worn. And I thought, "My God, was she murdered for that?"

IT seemed so easy a solution; too easy, in fact. Making deductions that were obvious, we could simply presume that somebody, having seen May Dixon come aboard the train with jewels, had robbed her while she slept. Maybe she had awakened, and the thief had protected himself by snatching up the knife and jabbing it deep into her throat . . .

I let the curtains drop back into place and turned to frown at the conductor. "How many passengers have we got in this car, Bob?"

He blinked, glanced about hurriedly. "There's only one more besides you three gentlemen," he said. "That's the man in Lower Five—Mr. Webb."

I nudged the porter. "Get him, George," I rapped out. "Looks as if we'll need all hands on deck." Then, to Tryton again: "You mean you had only five passengers, including Miss Dixon, in the whole car?"

"That's right, Mr. Canley."

The fat man with the voluptuous, red-lipped face—his name, I soon learned, was Rudolph Arnatz—began to stammer: "You know, s-omebody might have got in from another car—"

"This is the last car on the train!" I snapped. "The only way an outsider could have got in would have been from the car ahead. And the conductor here, having been into that car for a moment, would have seen anybody coming."

Tryton vehemently agreed. "Of course I would! Nobody came into this car, Mr. Canley."

There was a brief hush. Then Doctor Telleger, lifting his brows, said drily: "It might have been suicide, you know."

"Suicide?" I snorted at the idea. "Listen, Doc. A woman who wants to stab herself doesn't stop to unwrap a couple of novels first. Besides, why should she come and kill herself in a Pullman car, of all places? Why should May Dixon successful, rich young, beautiful—why the devil should she want to commit hari-kari? And finally—well, where are her jewels?"

The mention of jewels left them all gaping at one another. Arnatz, who had been pushing back what little hair he possessed, suddenly stood rigid, his arm

raised, his eyes widening. Our glances met obliquely in a clash. Maybe we both remembered, simultaneously, how he had thrust his fingers into my berth an hour ago . . . But there was no point in mentioning the thing before the others now.

George returned, breathing hard, to report, "Mr. Webb'll be right here, sir!"

I asked, "Was he asleep?"

"Y-yes, sir. I had to shake him."

It struck me as a little odd that anybody could have slept through the excitement of the last few minutes. Yet we really hadn't made much noise . . . I began buttoning my dressing gown.

"What're we going to do about this, Mr. Canley?" suddenly whispered Tryton.

"We're going to get the police aboard the minute we reach Rockport," I said grimly.

"Rockport," put in Doctor Telleger, quietly, "is where I leave the train."

"Nobody leaves," I assured him.

"Eh?"

"Not until the police have taken charge. After that, they're in command."

"Really?" he said, with a show of irritation. "Look here, sir. A cousin of mine is seriously ill. I've been called as a consulting physician. It's a critical case, and for me every second counts. I'll have to leave immediately."

"Oh," I said wearily, "tell it to the police. Why argue now?"

I SWUNG around and devoted the next few minutes to a more thorough inspection of May Dixon's berth. She had brought only two pieces of luggage with her—a suitcase and an overnight bag. The latter was open in the rack. I took it down; went through its contents—underwear of the flimsiest silk in pastel colors, a few lacy handkerchiefs; things of that sort; but there was no piece of jewelry. I opened the suitcase, too, with keys I'd found in the purse. It revealed nothing of importance, however; and I was just closing it when—

Well, somebody on the train must have used the emergency signal.

For suddenly there was a screaming, shrieking sound of brakes. The train shuddered as it abruptly lost speed. It stopped so crazily, in fact, that we were all thrown off balance. Some of us grasped at curtains for support. Rudolph Arnatz actually fell sprawling in the aisle.

"L-L-Lawd!" hysterically cried George. "Wh-what's gone an' happened now?"

We couldn't answer George. Those of us still on our feet were struggling to remain there. It was a wild scramble for stability. And when at last the train had stopped, we gaped about in bewilderment.

"Something wrong in a car ahead!" burst from Bob Tryton.

Even while he spoke he spun around and started running forward. Doctor Telleger, probably moved by impulse, lurched after him. Arnatz was pushing himself up from the floor, and I was still clinging for balance to May Dixon's curtains.

Suddenly, then, I felt something strange, startling, almost uncanny.

Up the aisle, between the walls of hanging green, swirled a cold wind! It struck me in a gust, sent a chill through me. I blinked toward the back platform. Though I couldn't see anyone there, I knew somebody must have opened the rear door!

Without a word to either George or Arnatz, I dashed down the aisle. The wind continued to beat against me, lifting my dressing gown high. When I reached the platform, I discovered my guess had been right. The door was open.

Moreover, I glared out into the darkness just in time to see a man plunging wildly toward the woods!

A thin, lean, short figure, bending far forward as he ran. He wore a topcoat over clothes that appeared to have been drawn on hurriedly. He carried a suitcase

that banged against his knees, impeding his strides. I recognized his figure instantly. It was Henry Webb!

On a surge of excitement I shouted, "Webb!"

He didn't even glance around. With all the power in his thin body he continued racing toward the shelter of the pine woods, some eighty yards away. Moonlight drenched the clearance about him; there was something almost spectral about the man.

It was no time to hesitate. In that moment it seemed May Dixon's murderer was affecting an escape. Why else should Webb be streaking away?

I jumped; slid down the embankment in an awkward huddle; and finally regained my footing on short, stiff grass. I went after him with all the speed I could muster. It was difficult, even painful, to plunge across that clearance in a pair of slippers, while the night wind ripped at my pajamas and dressing gown. Fortunately, however, my long legs covered ground fast, and I realized I was overtaking him.

So, however, did Webb.

TWICE he glanced back over his shoulder. Each time I heard an oath. Possibly, if he had dropped his suitcase, he might have got away. But he clung to the thing desperately. And as he neared the trees, I was within twenty feet of him.

Then, of a sudden, he stopped; whirled around to face me, his thin countenance congested with fury. His eyes, reflecting moonlight, blazed like those of a jungle beast. His hand snapped up from his pocket—and I stared into the bore of a black revolver!

"Damn you!" he panted. "Get back! Get back!"

But I didn't get back. I couldn't have stopped running even if I'd wanted to obey. Plunging on, I dived straight at his legs in a flying football tackle.

Webb fired.

The spurt of lurid flame almost blinded me. The crash of the weapon stunned my ears. It was my downward lunge that saved me. The bullet whizzed over my head. At that instant my weight smashed against Webb's knees.

He went down with a scream. Both of us rolled over crazily, and in the confusion of the impact I lost my grip on his legs. When I squirmed around in the grass and started back toward him, he was reaching out frantically for the revolver he had dropped. His fingers were actually on the weapon.

Well, I didn't wait for more trouble. Though still on my knees, I swung my fist through a long, vicious arc. He was too intent on recovering the revolver to dodge. My knuckles cracked squarely on his jaw, under the right ear.

Henry Webb went down on his side, thrashed about a little in the grass, then lay still and began to sob into his arms like a child!

"You damned fool!" I couldn't help gasping.

I jumped up, retrieved the revolver, and pointed it down at him. My expression must have been furious, and my husky voice, breathless and savage, sounded unrecognizable.

"Come on!" I rasped. "Get up and start back!"

Both the porter and Rudolph Arnatz had followed me out of the train; they were running across the clearance toward us. Farther back I could see Bob Tryton and Doctor Telleger. The conductor, having opened the front door of our car, was just descending, with the physician behind him. And from the chugging engine up front both the engineer and the fireman were running toward us with lanterns.

"George," I ordered, when the porter reached us, "pick up that suitcase! Mr. Arnatz, will you jerk that man to his feet?"

But Henry Webb didn't wait to be lifted. He rose of his own accord, shakily, still whimpering. His clothes hung about him in hopeless disarray. When moonlight illumined his thin face, it revealed long, bloody scratches on his left cheek. Apparently he'd been hurt in falling.

I remembered May Dixon with a knife in her throat, however; and realizing that this man might have murdered her, I could feel no sympathy for him.

"Get back to the train!" I snapped.

He started toward the cars wearily. Something — his courage, perhaps — seemed to have died in him, now that he no longer had a revolver. He didn't utter a single word. Nor did I. The investigation, I felt, could very wisely be delayed until we were back on the train.

As we crossed the clearance, the three passenger cars of the express became animated. Along their entire length lights flashed in windows as curtains were raised. Alarmed, panicky heads bobbed beyond the panes. Here we were deep in the Maine woods, with no logical reason for a stop; scant wonder that amazed and frightened eyes stared out at us.

Tryton, dashing up to us, glared at Webb and cried, "What the devil's he trying to do, Mr. Canley? Start a war?"

"Just a gunman gone wrong," I answered grimly. "Hop back there and lock the front door of our car, will you? We don't want a crowd of thrill-hunters from the cars ahead flooding back on us."

"Right! What are you going to do to him?"—with an outraged nod toward Webb.

"We'll march him into the smoking compartment and have a good, old-fashioned, heart-to-heart talk," I promised. "He's got lots to tell us!"

CHAPTER THREE

Webb's Suitcase

AGAIN the train roared on through the night. Tryton's key had isolated our car from those ahead, and our small group stood in the smoking compartment, glaring down at the miserable figure of Henry Webb.

He looked broken; broken in body and in spirit. A wreck of the dapper little fellow I'd noticed in this same compartment an hour and a half ago, before we had reached Pine Center. His quivering hand held a handkerchief to the scratches in his cheek, and he stared dumbly, haggardly, at the floor. The eyes that had once seemed crafty and wise were merely wretched.

"Well?" I challenged. "Let's have it!"

Webb looked up with an expression of actual agony. He shook his head. "Honest," he quavered, "I g-give you my word I didn't do that to her!"

"No?" I snapped. "I suppose you stopped the train and tried to get away just for the exercise, eh?"

"I— Oh, what's the use?" Webb ended his retort on a groan of utter despair. He clasped his hands between his knees and again stared wretchedly at the floor.

Tryton, his voice harsh, vehemently declared over my shoulder: "The whole thing's clear as glass! This man must have stabbed and robbed her, Mr. Canley. Then he pulled the emergency signal while we were all looking into May Dixon's berth; tried to make his getaway. If I'm right, he's probably got her jewels in that suitcase. That's why he hung on to the thing like that."

Webb looked up at him bitterly. "You're crazy," he said. "I haven't got anybody's jewels."

"It was you who pulled the emergency signal, wasn't it?" the conductor demanded.

"Yes, but—"

"All right, but what?"

"I didn't kill her. I didn't even know she was dead before the porter woke me!"

Tryton jeered: "Then why don't you answer Mr. Canley's question? If you didn't murder May Dixon, why the hell did you try to get away?"

But Webb, collapsing again, simply shook his head in mute anguish. He looked out of the window into blackness, as though his act was something he couldn't explain.

I said tensely: "We'd better have a look through that suitcase. If the jewels are there—"

"You can't do that!" The words came from Webb like shots. He half rose, then settled back rigidly, and rasped, "You've got no right to open my baggage! You know damned well you haven't! You're no real cop with a warrant!"

To my surprise Doctor Theodore Telleger sternly agreed. "He's right, Mr. Canley. You have no right to do anything like this."

"Nevertheless I'm going to do it," I retorted softly. "I'll take full responsibility. This is murder, Doctor Telleger. Murderers don't play according to rule. Why should we?"

"I must protest—"

"All right. Protest to the company, if you like."

I thrust my hand out to Henry Webb. "Let's have the keys to the suitcase."

He said harshly, "Yes? Go to the devil!"

"Do you give them or do I take them?" I demanded.

"Neither!"

I CAUGHT the little fellow by the shoulders and yanked him to his feet. My left arm went around him in a bear's embrace, pinioning his own arms to his sides. He struggled, of course. He kicked and gasped and squirmed. He even tried to bite. Doctor Telleger, expostulating indignantly, attempted to intervene. But both Tryton and Rudolph Arnatz held the tall man back, remonstrating with him.

Meanwhile my right hand was darting into Webb's pockets. I found a bunch of keys, dragged them out, and pushed him back into the seat—violently.

"A little while ago," I warned him, "you tried to kill me. You almost put a bullet through my head. I haven't forgotten that, Webb. If you think I'm going to play gentle tiddle-de-winks with you now you'd better guess again. . . . George, hand me that suitcase!"

The porter responded quickly but mechanically, like a man in a daze.

"Once more," stiffly snapped Doctor Telleger, "I protest against this, Mr. Canley! You're merely a railroad detective. You have no right to assume the prerogatives of the police!"

I said, with sarcasm I couldn't control, "Write a letter about it to *The Times*."

"I maintain," he drove on, "there is such a thing as personal liberty and rights even in times of—"

"Doctor," I interrupted, fitting keys to the suitcase's locks, "I think you're put out because I told you you'd have to remain on this train and talk to the police at Rockport. You strike me as being an intelligent man. You ought to know my duty requires me to— Hello! What the devil!"

I broke off my sentence and gaped into Henry Webb's suitcase. It had just opened, and every man in the compartment stared with amazement. Webb himself, cringing back in his corner, blinked up at us in misery. He was chalky of complexion. His eyes were tortured. Both his hands rapidly rubbed his knees.

I whistled softly. "Well, what do you know about that!"

For the suitcase, under a top layer of shirts, was crammed full of money and stacks of paper easy enough to identify, by their engraved tops, as securities!

Money—bonds—

George, the porter, whispered in stupefied awe, "I'll be a Chinaman's dawg!"

Even Doctor Telleger forgot further protest in his astonishment. We all stared at the contents of that grip. We all stared at Henry Webb. And a realization of the truth suddenly blazed through my mind like a streak of lightning.

"So that's it!" I exclaimed.

"Listen," groaned Webb, his hands lifted.

"Yesterday," I rasped, "a bank up in Summitville was robbed of twenty-five thousand dollars in cash and eighty thousand in securities! The police are hunting the thief along the Border, according to what I read in the papers. And now we find this—"

Henry Webb sprang to his feet. His face suddenly went scarlet. He didn't even attempt to deny his guilt as a bank robber. Instead, shaking his fists at us, he screamed: "But I didn't murder May Dixon! I tell you I never went near the woman! I didn't, I didn't, I didn't!"

Well, what can you do with a man like that, except hold him for the police?

OF course, I searched painstakingly through his suitcase. There was a curious thrill in fingering so much wealth. Its very presence explained Webb's desperate attempt to escape from the train. He must have realized that the police at Rockport would investigate everybody in our car; he must have feared they would make a thorough examination of our luggage. And with more than a hundred thousand dollars in his suitcase—money which, because of the securities, might easily be traced to the bank in Summitville—he hadn't dared remain to face the official inquisition.

Yet the fact that I found no jewels in his grip did not absolve him in the matter of murdering "the most beautiful girl on the air."

On the contrary; he was now obviously a criminal. As such, he merited more suspicion than did anybody else among us.

I said to him, "Put up your hands!"

"Wh-what for?" he stammered.

"I'm going to frisk your pockets."

"Like hell you are!" he cried. "You can't—"

"Listen, Webb," I flung back at him grimly, "when a man has tried to put a bullet through my head, I don't pay much attention to his likes and dislikes. In fact, nothing would please me more than a good excuse to plant a haymaker on your jaw. Are you going to put up your hands, or do I have to get rough?"

I took a menacing step toward him, and he fell back against the window—as pallid and unnerved a creature as I've ever encountered. He was trembling violently. He probably felt he could offer no adequate resistance to the five of us who glowered at him, for his arms slowly went up. And I began systematically to search his pockets for possible jewelry.

It was significant that Doctor Telleger no longer objected to my tactics, high-handed as they might have been. He watched with a tense frown, his eyes flashing. The revelation of the suitcase had completely subdued him.

Webb's pockets, however, yielded nothing of importance.

When at last I stepped back from him, with a grunt, the little thief collapsed on the leather seat and lowered his head into his hands. He uttered no further sounds save a few moans.

I took his revolver from my dressing-gown pocket and gave it to the conductor.

"Stay here and keep him quiet," I said. "I'm going to have a look at his berth."

The only one who followed me out of the smoking compartment was the short, fat, V-browed Rudolph Arnatz. He trotted along at my heels like an old dog, panting in excitement.

"I think," he whispered, "we've caught the murderer!"

"Yes?" I said drily.

"A man who'll rob a bank won't stop at stealing other things! You remember he was the only one who didn't get out of his berth when the body was found? I'll bet that's because he was busy dressing for his escape! I'll bet he was all dressed, under the blankets, when George went to wake him!"

"And what did he do with the jewels?" I asked, like a father humoring a child.

"Well—I don't know that, of course. Maybe—who knows—maybe he got rid of them while you were chasing him toward the woods. Maybe he threw the things away so's you wouldn't find them on him!"

Frankly, the idea made me halt. I stared back at Arnatz in something like dismay. There was, certainly, a great deal of common sense in his notion. Webb might have rid himself of May Dixon's jewels in order to destroy incriminating evidence of murder. He might easily have dropped them while running through the grass, without my having noticed it.

But we were now many miles beyond that clearance, and groaning over what might have happened could serve no purpose. So I proceded in silence to Henry Webb's berth.

While Arnatz held the curtains apart and peered eagerly over my shoulder, I hunted under the pillow and beneath the sheets. The search was careful, yet it produced nothing.

"Well," I finally muttered to Arnatz, "that's that. . . . " We let the curtains drop back into place, and I added, "Suppose you hop into the smoking compartment and help them pump Webb. I'm going to get a few clothes on."

He hesitated, then suggested almost slyly, "Aren't you going to search the—er—other berths?"

"I am," I assured him. "All of them!"

For the sake of thoroughness I really wanted to be alone when I hunted. The stout man nodded, presently left me; and I stood still, watching his corpulent figure sway and lurch along the aisle to the smoking compartment.

As soon as he had vanished, I moved toward his berth. To reach it, I had to pass the curtains that concealed the body of May Dixon; and for an instant I paused, wondering if it wouldn't be wiser to study the actual crime again. I frowned uncertainly. And—

Well, what happened then stabbed an icicle through me.

Distinctly, unmistakably, I heard somebody moving!

No, not in May Dixon's berth, but in the berth directly across the aisle!

I whirled around; stared in amazement at the heavy green curtains. I won't deny that my heart was suddenly thundering furiously, that my temples echoed each terrific thud. For a second I gaped at the curtains, dumbfounded.

Then—I raised both hands and swept them apart. . . . And blinked into the terrified face of a girl!

CHAPTER FOUR

"Stowaway"

I JUST stared at her. She was a youngster—probably seventeen or eighteen—a red-head as devilishly pretty as any ingenue on the screen. Most of her loveliness was concealed now behind a mask of pallor and fear. She sat fully dressed

in the lower berth, withdrawn far into a corner. She was clutching the lapels of a checkered sport coat to her throat; and a saucy little hat all but covered one of her blue eyes.

When I'd recovered my breath, I exclaimed, "Well! What are you doing here?"

"Please!" she blurted desperately. "Oh, please—I don't know anything about this dreadful m-m-murder! I just came on the train at th-the water tower!"

"What?"

"The water tower! I d-didn't know I was going to run into anything as terrible as this!"

We both seemed to be confused, so I drew a deep, steadying breath. A swift glance along the aisle assured me the others were still in the smoking compartment with Henry Webb—in an atmosphere, no doubt, of mutual distrust and tense suspicion.

I looked back at the girl; tried to calm her into coherence with a smile which, unfortunately, developed into a pretty tight and grim smirk.

"Let's get this straight, miss. You're a stowaway?"

"I—I am stealing the ride, yes!" she admitted shakily.

"Who are you?"

She hesitated at that, her forehead furrowed in anxiety, her teeth pressing down upon her lip.

"You might as well come clean," I advised curtly. "If you don't tell it to me, you'll have to tell it to the police at Rockport."

At that she looked down at a purse in her lap. "My—my name is Dorothy Glenn," she whispered.

"From—"

"I came on at—at Williamstown. That's where the train stops to—to fill up with water."

Williamstown, I realized, was a village we'd passed while I had my forty-five minutes of sleep. It wasn't a regular stop for the express.

I asked, "How did you get on here?"

She stared up at me suddenly, and there was a kind of despairing importunity in her blue eyes. Instead of replying she cried wretchedly: "You—you're not going to have me arrested, are you? I heard them say you're a detective on this railroad—"

Holding the curtains apart and staring down at her, I shrugged. "That all depends," I answered. "I'll have to turn you over to the police if you don't tell me things. . . . I asked how you got on this train."

"I—I caught it just before it left the water tank!" she blurted in a surge of confession. Her hands gestured jerkily. "When it stopped, I climbed to the back platform and peeped into the window. I couldn't see the conductor or the porter around, so I—I took a chance. I came in. I looked through the curtains of this berth, and there wasn't anybody in it, so I jumped in and—and just sat here while the train started away."

"What was the idea?" I demanded.

"Of what?"

"Stealing a ride?"

Again, in a kind of anguish, Dorothy Glenn looked down at her purse. She whispered unsteadily: "I'm broke."

"The old story. . . . How far do you think you can travel this way?"

"Oh, I've got to get to New York!" she gasped. "I must!"

"Must?"

"That's where I l-live!"

"Then what in heaven's name are you doing up in these Maine woods?"

THE way she hesitated, the way she lowered her head, the way tears came into her eyes—well, I had a queer sense of abashment. But the murder of May

Dixon directly concerned me, and I couldn't soften before the personal troubles of this young red-haired lady. So I abruptly became grim.

"Look here," I snapped, "you probably heard everything we said about the murder."

"Y-yes."

"What do you know about it?"

"I?"—in astonishment. "Nothing!"

"Now, listen, Miss Glenn—"

"Good grief!" she ejaculated. "You don't think I killed—"

"Maybe I don't," I interrupted. "But there's no guessing what the police may think when they find a stowaway in the berth opposite a murdered body."

"Oh!" Her hands flew in horror to her cheeks. Her eyes became round, terrified.

"The best thing you can do," I assured her, "is be frank about everything. First—when did you discover that May Dixon had been stabbed?"

"Only w-when I heard you and the conductor talking about it out in the aisle!"

"You didn't know anything was wrong before that?"

"No! I didn't dare look out."

"Didn't you hear anything? Some sound from May Dixon's berth that might have suggested—well, trouble?"

At that Dorothy Glenn sat up tensely, rigidly. Her eyes fastened on mine, blinked in quick excitement. For the moment she seemed to forget her own danger as she whispered: "Oh, yes! I—I heard a sort of gasp!"

"From her?"—quickly.

"I think so! It—it wasn't a gasp, exactly. It was as if she'd been about to scream, and then a hand was pressed over her mouth. You know, a stifled kind of sound!"

I nodded. "How long was that," I asked, "before the conductor and I came to the body?"

"Oh, five or ten minutes. Hardly that, even!"

"Didn't you look out to see what had happened?"

"I didn't dare, I tell you! I was afraid to touch the curtains. If anybody had seen me in here—"

She checked herself, and I shot another swift glance down the aisle. None of the others had emerged from the smoking compartment. In truth, I'd been talking to the girl scarcely more than a minute. The roar of the train obliterated the sound of our voices, and we hadn't attracted any attention.

So I peered back at her, narrowly. There was a queer idea churning about in my head. "Listen, Miss Glenn," I said. "Do you want me to give you a break when the police board the train?"

"A break?"—puzzled.

"Yes! As a company detective, I can help you slip out of trouble with the railroad. But you've got to do something for me if you want my help!"

"What?"

"Stay just where you are. Don't make a sound. Don't let anybody know you're here. I won't say a word to any of them. After a while I may slip a note in to you. If I do, just follow the instructions on that note explicitly! Understand?"

"But—"

"Will you do it?"

SHE stared at me dazedly. I don't think she even realized that after a moment she nodded.

I said, "Good!" and let the curtains drop back into place again, concealing her. Instead of moving away, however, I turned toward May Dixon's berth; and over my shoulder I whispered: "Miss Glenn, before I go I want you to tell me what you were doing up here. How is it a city girl like you is up in the Maine woods, broke, stealing a ride home?"

There was a moment of silence. Then her low voice, muffled and strained, came to me hesitantly. "I—eloped—"

"Eh?"

"This morning. I went away with him in his car. We—we were going to be married in Canada. But when we got up this far, I—oh, I suddenly realized he didn't want to marry me at all!" A pause; a sob; then, "he—he stopped for gas near Williamstown. While he went into the gas station, I—ran away. I ran as far as the tracks. The train was there, taking on water. And I—well, I climbed the back platform! But I didn't have a cent with me to pay for my fare. So—"

"All right," I interrupted. "Save the rest."

Then I walked off toward Rudolph Arnatz's berth to complete my original plan of searching. As I took those few strides, I couldn't help smiling bitterly. What a railroad car! It now contained a corpse, a fugitive bank robber, a stowaway. . . . and me, Stephen Canley, struggling to bring clarity out of this crazy confusion!

Despite all that had happened, I still didn't know who had murdered May Dixon.

Henry Webb?

That, at the moment, seemed most plausible, considering the fact that he was indubitably a criminal. Still why should a man with a hundred grand in his suitcase risk that fortune and his own safety by murdering a woman for a few jewels?

There was this girl, Dorothy Glenn, to consider too. After all, how could I be certain she had told the truth? How could I feel sure she hadn't crossed the aisle to take May Dixon's jewels?

I was scowling as I parted the curtains of Arnatz's berth to resume my search. There was nothing under his pillow, nothing under the blankets. In fact, I was just about to turn away to Doctor Telleger's berth when—

Between the mattress and the sideboards of the bed I caught a queer flash, as if a spark had flown. . . . I stiffened, contracted my brows. My hand dived down into the space and promptly emerged with—a woman's blazing diamond ring!

It was like finding a gold mine. I stared at the thing, half incredulous, and a hundred new thoughts feverishly stampeded through my mind. With my nerves hammering, I plunged back to a closer examination of the berth. In truth, I almost ripped the thing apart in my excited zeal.

But there was nothing else to be found.

FINALLY I straightened again in the aisle, and examined the ring with a tense frown. It was genuine and expensive. I was still standing there, turning it, when Arnatz himself, followed by the tall, austere Doctor Theodore Telleger, came toward me from the smoking compartment.

Arnatz was the first to see the ring flashing in my hand. He halted; caught his breath and blinked.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "Where—where did you find that?"

And Telleger instantly added a sharp: "Is it one of hers, Mr. Canley?"

I peered up narrowly at the two men. Then my gaze squarely crashed against Arnatz's, and I said in a low voice: "I found this in your berth."

"What!"

"In your berth."

The fat man gaped at me. He gaped at the ring. His mouth fell open, but for a moment no sound escaped him. He seemed to be more dumbfounded than terrified; more stunned than alarmed; and yet his round face became deathly pale, so that the thick lips seemed almost cerise by contrast.

"B-but that's impossible!" he forced out hoarsely. "How could you find it in my berth? I never—"

"I'm not explaining," I said quietly. "I'm simply telling you what happened."

"But how—"

"The explanation, I think, is your job."

At that Arnatz suddenly lifted a fist above his head. His eyes flamed; his cheeks regained their color with a rush; and he cried out in shrill outrage: "Somebody put it there! Somebody's trying to throw suspicion on me! I never saw that ring before—I swear it!"

His outcry must have reached the smoking compartment, for both Bob Tryton and porter, George, looked out in amazement. Tryton called a question. He couldn't leave Henry Webb alone, unguarded, of course, so he remained where he was. I held up the ring for him to see and nodded toward Arnatz's berth.

"I don't care where you found it!" the stout man shouted. "I didn't put it there! Somebody in this car is trying to throw guilt on me! Somebody is—"

"You said that before," I interrupted drily. Then, as his fury subsided, I went on: "Let's get things straight, Mr. Arnatz. First—you're the only man here we don't know anything about. We know Webb is a crook trying to escape from the law. We know Doctor Telleger is a physician answering a call from Rockport. Now—well, how about you?"

"I'm a salesman!" he retorted spiritedly. "I sell farm equipment. Right now I'm on my way back from Canada, where I spent a week with a man who's taken an agency for our machines. The name of my firm is Universal Farm Service, Incorporated. You can verify that."

I said, "Being a salesman doesn't necessarily absolve you." For I was thinking, frankly, that he might once more have groped in the wrong berth—May Dixon's—"by mistake." Possibly he guessed my thoughts, too, for he gulped in an awkward, embarrassed way.

"Listen, Mr. Canley," he offered thickly, "I'll let you look through all my baggage and all my clothes, if you like! I haven't got that poor woman's jewelry. I—I don't know any more about this terrible business than you do!"

"All right—" I began.

But I dropped the phrase in surprise; looked around in bewilderment. For the train was slowing down again. Not abruptly this time; not in a way to stagger us; but deliberately, as if it were pulling into a station. Yet it was scarcely two o'clock. We were still more than a two hour's run from our next scheduled stop, Rockport.

"What's all this?" I called to the conductor.

"Don't know, Mr. Canley," he answered, himself startled. "We're pulling into Kent. Maybe we were signaled."

MY first thought, curiously enough, was of Henry Webb. If we stopped, would he make another mad attempt to escape? On impulse I strode back to the smoking compartment, pushing past Arnatz and Telleger. They followed me quickly, and we all stood over the small, agonized bank robber while the train ground and squeaked to a halt beside the Kent station platform.

We soon learned it wasn't a signal which had stopped us there, but an idea of the engineer's.

Back at the clearance where we had prevented Webb's escape, we had of course, told the man what had occurred. Now his grimy face appeared in the darkness outside the smoking compartment's window. He called up to me: "Thought you'd want to phone ahead to Rockport, Mr. Canley, so's the police will meet us at the station!"

I stepped past Webb and opened the window a few inches. "Good idea," I agreed. "Is the station agent around?"

"Sure. Back there."—with an indicatory jerk of his thumb.

"All right. Ask him to phone Rockport, will you? And at the same time he'd better try to get in touch with May Dixon's people back at Pine Center. Notify them of her death."

"Oke!" said the engineer, and ran off along the platform.

Two minutes later we were traveling again. I suppose there were dozens of people in the cars ahead who were confounded by these events; people who would have swarmed in upon us for explanations, had we opened the doors which stood like floodgates against their advance. We continued, however, to keep ourselves isolated—a circumstance that saved us much confusion and unnecessary excitement. As we raced on toward Rockport, there were still only six of us—excluding the hidden Dorothy Glenn—in that last Pullman.

I peered down at Henry Webb, then transferred my attention to Rudolph Arnatz.

The engineer's interruption had served slightly to ease the fat man's tension. He still scowled at the pocket of my dressing gown which contained the diamond ring; still made emphatic declarations that he was not responsible for the jewel's presence in his berth; still offered to open all his baggage for anybody's inspection.

But I decided for the time to ignore the man. Argument of this sort could achieve little. What I needed, I realized, was more conclusive evidence. And the best evidence of all, possibly, would be the fingerprints the police might find on the knife with which the murder had been committed.

And then, of a sudden, I knew I had made a stupid and unpardonable mistake. That knife had been left in May Dixon's berth. It ought to be in my possession, carefully guarded.

I strode down the aisle quickly. Doctor Telleger was at my back, following like a shadow. I couldn't help swinging a queer glance at the curtains which concealed Dorothy Glenn. Behind them, however, there was complete silence.

With Doctor Telleger intently watching, I parted May Dixon's curtains. In the dim yellow light she looked ghastly. Her eyes were still open, gazing upward with horrible, glassy fixity. The blood on her neck and shoulders was a dreadful sight, and I couldn't restrain a shudder.

Then I glanced down toward the foot of the berth, where the knife had been left—and instantly gasped. Gasped in dismay, in fear, in fury.

For the weapon was gone!

CHAPTER FIVE

And Now the Lights

MY search for the knife was frantic. I clawed over the dead woman's bed, shook her curtains, knelt to the floor. I was enraged with myself for my former negligence. Doctor Telleger kept repeating in amazement: "I put the knife down right there, near her feet! I remember it distinctly!"

He hunted with me. But we could find no trace of the thing at all!

Our excitement attracted both Arnatz and the porter, who came rushing down the aisle. Tryton, too, would have come if I hadn't harshly called to him to maintain his guard over Henry Webb. We continued seeking long after all hope for the weapon's recovery was gone. At last I turned to the others bitterly.

"I don't suppose any of you know what happened to it—and yet somebody in this car must have taken the thing!"

They gaped at me in shocked silence.

They exchanged glances that were half fearful, half doubtful.

"How could any of us have taken it?" Telleger finally demanded, with a spurt of indignation. "We've been together constantly since the discovery of the murder, haven't we? Not one of us—except yourself, Mr. Canley—has been in this aisle alone, unobserved by the others. All of us—except you, Mr. Canley—have been in the smoking compartment with Webb practically every minute!"

After that they all squinted at me in a new way—a startled, suspicious way. Even George, the porter, looked at me with a hint of fear. It was easy enough to understand that they had suddenly begun to suspect me of having taken the knife myself; of having murdered May Dixon!

I couldn't restrain a bitter crack of laughter.

"I can't blame you for your thoughts," I said, "but they're wrong."

"Who could have taken the knife without our knowing it?" Arnatz demanded.

My mind stabbed the curtains behind me to rest on Dorothy Glenn. She could have reached across the aisle while the rest of us were in the smoking compartment. Had she? Had all her protestations of innocence been lies? Of course, I could have parted those curtains then and there and revealed her presence; I could have challenged her, searched the berth in which she was hiding as I had searched the others.

But—I didn't.

I REFRAINED principally because, far back in my mind, I had a vague yet compelling notion that I would be able to use Dorothy Glenn later as a sort of trump card. I didn't want her presence on the train betrayed so soon. I wanted her to remain unseen—I knew she must be cowering now in unearthly terror, wondering how her mad escapade would end.

Suddenly I stiffened and said: "Gentlemen, we'd all better get dressed. We'll be in Rockport within two hours. I hardly think any of us can go back to sleep."

They agreed to that readily enough, grumbling words I didn't attempt to catch. As Arnatz and Doctor Telleger went to their berths, I parted May Dixon's curtains for a final look at the body and at the bed. Her face was like wax. Her parted lips—

And then I started.

My eyes widened a little as I bent over her features; my nerves became taut.

For I discovered something I had completely missed before. May Dixon's lipstick having been generously applied, her mouth now looked fantastically red in that dead, pallid face. What held my stare was the fact that the lipstick's color had been smeared downward, so that it showed tiny streaks from the lower lip to the chin. Not streaks, precisely; merely little daubs of red.

I thought at once of Dorothy Glenn's assertion that she had heard a stifled scream, a gasp that was not a gasp. Had the murderer clamped a hand over May Dixon's mouth just before plunging the knife into her throat? Had his hand been responsible for the smeared lipstick?

I sent a quick, flashing glance along the aisle. Both Telleger and Arnatz were bending into their berths, half hidden by the heavy curtains. George, the porter, had momentarily vanished—either into his pantry or into the smoking compartment, where Bob Tryton stood guard over Henry Webb.

Once more I leaned close to the dead woman's lips; frowned at them tensely. And at that instant—

Suddenly, blindingly, every light in the car was extinguished! I stood in utter blackness!

"What on earth—"

"Say! What the devil is that?"

The hoarse cries burst simultaneously from Rudolph Arnatz and Doctor Theodore Telleger. Ordinarily the fact that the lights had gone out might not have alarmed them. Tonight, however, with their nerves twanging, with a corpse in our car, with a murderer among us—tonight anything which was abnormal was enough to evoke a chorus of terrified questions.

"Steady!" I cried aloud. "They'll probably go on in a minute! Stay where you are!"

We waited, but the lights did not blaze again.

In that intense darkness the roar of the train suddenly seemed deafening. We must have sped around a bend, for I was thrown slightly off balance. I staggered. In reaching for support I caught the cold, dead wrist of May Dixon—and I couldn't have shuddered more violently if I'd seized upon the moist body of a snake in that darkness.

THE seconds passed like so many hours, Nobody spoke. All of us waited in the hope that we'd soon be able to see again. And in that short interval my mind raced frantically.

Had somebody purposely extinguished these lights?

The switch was on the forward platform. Nobody, I knew, had been near it. Yet it would have been a simple matter to short-circuit the entire lighting system of the car. Either Arnatz or Telleger, bending into his berth, might have unscrewed his electric bulb; might have inserted a coin or a key in the socket to cause the short circuit! At this very instant, indeed, he might be screwing the bulb back into place—unseen in the blackness.

A soft oath burst from my lips. I started groping down the aisle, my arms outstretched. First I touched the flabby figure of Arnatz, and he recoiled with a gasp.

"Dont jump," I whispered. "It's all right."

He, at any rate, was out in the aisle.

By the time I collided with the doctor, he, too, had moved away from his berth.

"What is it?" he blurted when I touched him.

"Nothing! I—"

It was impossible to finish the sentence. For suddenly, from the rear of the car, burst a clamor of wild shouts and curses —the yells of fighting men! The sounds swept up the aisle like a storm!

I heard Bob Tryton rage, "Damn you, let go! Let go! Help! Mr. Canley! George! Help!"

And Henry Webb's shrill screams: "Give me that gun! D'you hear? Give it to me, you dirty—"

By that time I was dashing along the aisle madly, with all the speed I could manage. In the darkness I crashed against Arnatz, sent him sprawling. I tripped over him, almost fell. Only a wild clutch at the curtains kept me on my feet. And I raced on to the smoking compartment, my heart thundering crazily.

"Mr. Canley! Mr. Canley!"

The hoarse, breathless roars of the conductor were filling the car. I could hear feet pounding about in a furious struggle. Near the smoking compartment I smashed against the porter. As he went reeling away, he groaned: "Lawd! Oh Lawd!"

Then I swung into the compartment's door. The little chamber was not quite as dark as the aisle. Starlight came through its uncurtained window. Silhouetted against the pane were the conductor and Henry Webb, staggering about in an insane battle. Their arms and legs were interlocked. All I could see of them was a black, whirling mass.

I sprang forward, snarling. Somehow

I got my arm hooked around Webb's throat. I pulled his head back, so that he had to glare up at the ceiling. He howled in pain and frustration. He still struggled. One of his hands rose, and I saw with a pang that it held the revolver!

But Tryton seized the weapon, wrenched it fiercely out of the little man's grip.

IN a moment we had him thrown back upon the seat. And once more defeated, Henry Webb dropped his head into his arms and began to sob and weep like a child.

"What happened?" I rasped.

Tryton, disheveled, hatless, and breathing hard, pointed to the window. It was open a few inches.

"I—I wanted to see if the lights on the whole train had blown," the conductor panted, "or if it was only in this car! Webb had his head down in his hands. He wasn't watching me—hadn't looked up in five minutes. So I opened the window and tried to peep ahead. And I'd just seen that the other cars were all showing lights when—when this little devil made a grab for the gun!"

"And got it!" I added.

"He—he did it so quick he had it before I knew what was what! But I caught him before he got out of here to run amuck. I couldn't get hold of the gun, though. He sure can wriggle, this feller! . . . Say, there's a spare lantern in George's pantry, Mr. Canley! Let's have some light!"

George needed no second urging. A minute later, when we were all huddled together in the smoking compartment, the porter brought in the lantern. He had already lit it, and its red glow showed our faces, eyes ablaze.

I glared down at Henry Webb and snapped, "Still trying to get away, eh?"

"Let me alone!" he moaned into his hands.

"I suppose you felt any risk was better than facing the Rockport police!"

To that he made no reply.

I turned away from him with a snort; scowled at the group of reddishly illuminated faces—faces already haggard with strain. And I rapped out blunty: "Either a fuse blew out in this car, or else it was deliberately blown out! I don't mind telling you I'm going to have a look at every electric bulb that was within reach of any of you!"

Arnatz, apparently aghast, protested: "But Mr. Canley! Why—should anybody want to blow a fuse?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out. My guess is that somebody wanted an opportunity to hide either the knife or the jewels in darkness!"

And then Doctor Telleger's deep, firm voice put in with a hint of skepticism: "Just how, Mr. Canley, do you propose to examine the bulbs—and the sockets, I presume—without light?"

"I have plenty of matches."

While the doctor spoke, I had turned to the door. Now I paused and glanced back at Tryton to ask sharply: "What time is it? How long before we reach Rockport?"

He drew his watch and held it close to the lantern. The time was exactly 2:11 A. M. I looked down at the watch—and a queer yet terrible shock crashed through me . . . left me rigid, frozen, yet wildly tingling in every nerve. . . .

I blinked up at that group of faces. And without uttering another word I swung around and left the compartment; strode down the black aisle, groped along the curtains, and finally climbed into my own berth.

I no longer cared to inspect the bulbs I was tense as a coiled spring now, with perspiration on my forehead. For I had seen something that had stunned me.

SEATED in my berth, I sent up the window shade, and starlight poured upon me through the window. I spent a minute in fast, amazed thought. Then, as swiftly as my hands could dart about, I took a scrap of paper and a pencil from my jacket pockets; propped the slip on my knee and scrawled a hurried, yet concise note. My arm was so constricted that I could scarcely write.

When the note was finished, however, I slipped back into the aisle. Voices rumbled out of the smoking compartment; voices of men who were strained by vicious suspicion of one another. I was breathing rapidly. Three quick, noiseless strides brought me to the berth opposite May Dixon's. I parted the curtains a little and whispered: "Miss Glenn?"

Her voice came at once, hushed by fear. "Yes?"

"Here's the note and some matches. Do exactly as I've instructed you to do. The matches are to help you read. And remember—play along with me, and I'll keep you out of trouble for boarding this train!"

"I—I'll do anything you say!" she gasped.

"Good!"

I dropped the curtains and went on to examine the electric bulbs over Telleger's bed and over Arnatz's. Frankly, however, I wished merely to give Dorothy Glenn time to read.

But in a few moments—well, if I was right in my ideas, she would help me identify the murderer of May Dixon!

TWO minutes later I was back beside her curtains. Without touching them, I whispered: "All right, Miss Glenn?"

She answered: "Y-yes!"

"You understand what you're to do?"

"Yes!"

"And you'll do it?"

"If—if you're sure it's right—"

"Trust that part of it to me."

"All right," she said tensely.

"Then—here goes!"

Without further hesitation I pulled her curtains wide apart. I lit a match so that its tiny flare revealed her, cowering back in a corner. Her hat was awry now, and she still looked wildly terrified. While she stared at me and waited, I turned my head to yell—yelled hoarsely, like a man who sees a ghost.

"Tryton! George! Everybody—quick!"

Instantly they came running from the smoking compartment. First George, carrying his lantern; then the others.

Abruptly halting, George gaped at the girl with eyes that seemed ready to burst out of his head. The others, as they arrived, ogled her in dumbstruck amazement. Tryton, pushing Henry Webb ahead of him, looked at Dorothy Glenn as though she were an hallucination.

"What on earth!" the conductor gasped. "Wh-where did she come from?"

"She says she got on at Williamstown," I answered grimly. "Slipped in while nobody was watching, to steal a ride."

"Williamstown!" hushedly cried George. "Why, that there's where we stopped for water—"

"At about twelve thirty," I interrupted, softly. "About half an hour before the murder!"

Arnatz blurted, "You mean she—"

But I silenced him and swung menacingly toward the girl. In harsh tones I demanded:

"What's your name, miss?"

"D-Dorothy Glenn!" She whispered it like one too profoundly frightened even to think of a lie.

"You've been in this berth ever since you came on the train?"

"Y-yes!"

"And you've heard everything that happened in this car tonight?"

"Yes—I couldn't help hearing!"

"Why didn't you show yourself?"

"I—I was afraid," Dorothy Glenn suddenly sobbed. She covered her face with her hands, and I realized she was an excellent little actress.

My own heart was banging wildly as I drove on. "Then you must have been sitting right here when May Dixon was murdered!"

"I was!"

"Didn't you look out?"

"I did—" Abruptly she raised her head and looked at me with burning, desperate eyes. The men around us, holding their breaths, leaned toward her in tense amazement. Dorothy Glenn blurted: "I looked out when she sort of—of tried to scream! When he put his hand on her mouth! I looked out just as he s-s-stabbed her!"

"Who?"

The cry didn't come from me. It came from two of the others, in a hoarse chorus.

"He!" She pointed dramatically. "The conductor!"

WELL, I didn't wait for the trouble to strike me. As the others all whirled around to gape at the petrified Bob Tryton, I shot out my hand and caught the revolver he still grasped. He was so stunned by Dorothy Glenn's words that he scarcely realized I wrenched the weapon out of his hand. He fell back against the curtains, his mouth open. Even in the red light of the lantern Tryton's flashy face looked yellow, pasty.

"He put his hand over her mouth," Dorothy Glenn rushed on, "just as she woke up! He—"

A low, throttled cry broke from Bob Tryton. It seemed to emanate from the depths of his chest. He staggered back a step or two, his arms raised as if to ward off blows. I don't think I've ever seen another face quite so ghastly in terror, so yellow and limp and horrified.

Heaven alone knows what impulse lashed the man. Before any of us could intervene, he had turned and was racing madly for the rear of the car. With a yell, I lunged after him. But we were in one another's way; and we lost precious time before I broke out of the mass and plunged on between the curtains.

Tryton had already vanished into the smoking compartment. What he intended to do, I couldn't guess. But the revolver was in my hand, and I felt he was trapped.

I swung into the smoking compartment—and sustained the worst shock of all.

The window was wide open!

And though the train was roaring through the woods at better than forty-five miles an hour, I was exactly in time to see Bob Tryton hurl himself crazily into the darkness!

True, I made an ineffectual effort to catch him. I shouted wildly. But it was too late. Stunned, breathless, my eyes bulging, I could only lean out into the wind and gape back at a black huddle that lay beside the tracks.

Why did he make that insane move? I don't know. There's no explaining the things people will do when faced with conviction for murder.

I know only that for the second time on this run the emergency stop signal was used. For the second time the train came to a grinding, staggering, shuddering halt in the midst of the Maine woods.

I gave the revolver to Rudolph Arnatz. "You watch Henry Webb!" I rasped.

"Right," he said crisply.

George, the porter, meanwhile opened the back door with shaky hands. A moment later he, Doctor Telleger, and I were dashing madly back along the tracks through a cold night wind. George carried the lantern. When I

glanced over my shoulder, I could see that the engineer and the fireman were following us.

And as we ran, I panted hoarsely to Telleger, "God, I never thought Tryton would act this way!"

As a matter of truth, I had simply hoped to jolt the man into making some incriminating declaration. That was why I had staged the scene with Dorothy Glenn.

I'd realized that the only two who had been admittedly awake at the time of the murder of May Dixon were Tryton and George. The porter had been in his pantry, polishing shoes; even the conductor conceded that. But Tryton himself might have been anywhere.

MOST important, however, had been this circumstance—when Tryton had held his watch near the lantern, I had clearly seen the palm of his hand. It was daubed with tiny marks of red—marks that might have been left there by the lipstick on May Dixon's mouth! . . . And then I had remembered that Tryton was the only one who'd had an opportunity to take the knife out of Max Dixon's berth. He had passed her when he went to lock the door of our car against the people in the cars ahead. At that moment we were all in the smoking compartment with Webb, and Tryton had had an easy opportunity. But, of course, there had been no actual proof of his guilt. That was why I had attempted to jolt him into saying something—by using the testimony of an unexpected "eye-witness."

Running, we could see the conductor's bulk distinctly now, still motionless beside the tracks. We were breathless when we finally reached him. He lay unconscious, his face and hands hideously lacerated. But he wasn't dead. By the red light of George's lantern Doctor Telleger examined the man. Then, his countenance grim, he snapped: "Come on! We'd better carry him back!"

"Critically hurt?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so!"

The doctor held the lantern now, while George and I lifted the insensate Tryton. Within a few moments we were joined by the two ponderous men from the locomotive; and though they were dazed by the news of what had happened, they quickly helped us with our burden. We trudged back to the train as though we were bearing a corpse.

Afterwards—

Well, perhaps you recall the statement Tryton made to the Rockport police before he died in the hospital. The newspapers gave it considerable space. He confessed, for one thing, that he had dropped a ring into Arnatz's berth with some vague hope of directing suspicion away from himself. And he added—

> "Yes, I short-circuited the lights, too. It was while Webb had his head lowered in his arms. I unscrewed the bulb and put the muzzle of the revolver into the socket. Webb was momentarily blinded, I guess, and I had the bulb back in the socket before he knew what was what. . . . I did it simply for an excuse to lean out of the window in darkness and throw away the knife which was in my pocket. . . . You'll find the jewels hidden in the car ahead. I went there to hide them after the—"

The rest doesn't matter. We recovered May Dixon's jewels, of course. But the interesting point is this: According to the newspapers, Bob Tryton's dying words were:

"God, I was a fool to do anything like that with—with a detective in the car!"

But the papers were wrong. I stood beside Tryton's bed when he died, and I know. I saw that queer, pained smile creep over his features; heard his final groan. And those last words—believe it or not—were: "God, wasn't she a—a little beauty?"

SPICE OF LIFE

THE story is told of a magazine publisher who was the recipient of an enthusiastic letter from a reader. The missive expressed infinite delight with the current number of the magazine in question and ended something in this wise—"Every single story in this issue was swell! I liked all of them equally well and in closing I want to say that you couldn't do a better job under any conceivable circumstances."

No, the magazine wasn't DIME DETECTIVE and we sincerely hope it never will be. But if the occasion ever arises we're going to answer that reader in exactly the same way that the publisher in the story replied.

Here's what he said—

Dear Mr. X—

Thank you for your interesting and highly disturbing letter.

I have called a conference of the various editors of the magazine and am going to determine, when it meets, just how many of them should be fired. For certainly some, or all of them, are absolutely unfitted for their jobs.

When a reader writes in and tells me that he has liked every story in the magazine equally well I know it's time to do something radical. For that is the last thing in the world I want. You aren't supposed to like all the stories equally well. You aren't even supposed to like all the stories!

Variety is what we want—both in the stories we print and in the reactions we get from the readers. And when any one issue of the magazine is pitched on a key where it appeals *in toto* to one single reader with no single feature in the magazine standing out for particular attention, that means that monotony and sameness are creeping in and freshness and variety making their exit.

Let me know how you like future issues of the magazine. I'm going to try to see that there will be at least one story in each issue that you can find fault with.

Very truly yours,

Featured In The Next Issue

MOUTHPIECE

by JOHN LAWRENCE

The window went up like a charm. Beckett's voice was harsh, sharp. "Don't move! Drop the roscoe! I'll let you have—" The big man almost fell off the table. The ash tray clattered to the floor in a shower of sparks as he half attempted to whirl round, froze when Beckett ripped, "Freeze or—"

It's the Newest Novel-Length Sam Beckett Thriller and It's Got All the Smashing Punch that the Others Had and Then Some!

and

ROMANY KILL

by EDWARD PARRISH WARE

His body was bent over, head on arms, the position suggesting sleep or possibly intoxication. It was neither. A closer view revealed the ebony hilt of a dagger protruding from beneath his left shoulder blade—and a touch of his pulseless wrist informed me he was dead. Then a woman screamed—

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We don't expect to have DIME DETECTIVE readers like every story equally well; nor do we want them to. The extreme variety of locale, and tempo, and type, and characterization, action and all ingredients we try to inject into our pages, almost preclude such a possibility from the beginning.

But we do think that every story should have some one feature, some one particular quality that will interest every reader. So don't ever try to tell us we "couldn't do a better job." We simply wouldn't believe you. It's a high batting average we're after—not a fabulously perfect one.

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(See p. 60.)

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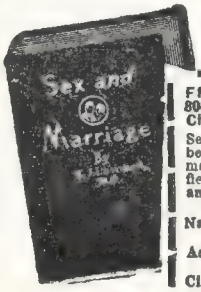
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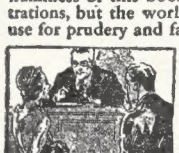
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